Regardless of the Hardships

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Regardless of the Hardships

by Ehann

Summary

The first thing Shen Yuan did upon transmigrating was shave that monstrosity of a mustache. What was Mu Qingfang thinking, Shen Yuan wondered, glaring at himself in the mirror?! Well, he thought, it's too late now.

He was now Mu Qingfang, peak lord of Qian Cao peak. He might as well get used to calling himself that now, so.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

I Volunteer Myself To Medicine

I will heal the wounded and rescue the dying, regardless of the hardships. --Oath for medical students.

The first thing Shen Yuan did upon transmigrating was shave that monstrosity of a mustache. What was Mu Qingfang thinking, Shen Yuan wondered, glaring at himself in the mirror?! Well, he thought, it's too late now.

He was now Mu Qingfang, peak lord of Qian Cao peak. He might as well get used to calling himself that now, so.

The OG Mu Qingfang had apparently been a nice guy. His disciples liked him well enough. Mu Qingfang was grateful that whatever entity shoved him into this lightly used body had also downloaded all the doctor files relevant to this world.

Mu Qingfang could recognize any and all flora that might affect a person. He knew all the right treatments. He could make all the poultices and heal all the wounds he came across. Fuck, he even knew how to *sew*.

His head disciple was a youngish looking woman who appeared to be in her early twenties. Mu Qingfang actually didn't know how old she really was, though. Only *relevant* files had gotten downloaded, and apparently, somehow the Qian Cao peak head disciple's stats weren't relevant.

Now, his martial siblings, however-Mu Qingfang knew *all* about them. He knew about Zhangmen Shixiong's cursed sword. He knew about Shen Shixiong's damaged cultivation from having practiced demonic cultivation in his youth. He knew Wei Qingwei's tendency to qi-deviate when forging certain swords.

He knew that Shang Qinghua was in an abusive relationship with someone outside of the sect, and his mousy shixiong liked to pilfer medical supplies. (The OG Mu Qingfang had deliberately left various stuff left in the main lobby in an easy to access cabinet. Shen Yuan suspected that OG Qingfang just wanted Shang Shixiong to be able to take care of himself, and didn't take offense at his Shixiong's secretive ways.)

Yu Qingxin, the Ling Yu peak lord in charge of beast taming and general animal husbandry was a pretty good field medic. Mu Qingfang knew that he did a year of intense study while Mu Qingfang was still a disciple.
Of all his martial siblings, Mu Qingfang was most concerned about Liu Qingge and his tendency to try and walk off mortal wounds- that is, wounds that were mortal even to a cultivator of his caliber!

Mu Qingfang had discovered several thick notebooks filled with OG Qingfang's observations and tricks for treating Liu Shixiong. Within that notebook were several suggestions about

sex-pollen related mischief. Apparently good old Liu Shixiong had a disturbing tendency to get sex pollened on the regular, all the while completely unaware.

He often returned to his mountain eager to give his disciples a beating. Mu Qingfang had postulated that this was Liu Qingge's way of working out the pollen since he seemed to have no interest in taking care of it, the um. Usual way.

Other entries held run of the mill advice such as : Under no circumstances approach Shen Shixiong from the back. Make sure to make some noise on approach.

Another entry said: If you see Shang Shixiong, make sure to offer some calming tea, and make sure he has both eaten and slept in the preceding forty-eight hours.

Mu Qingfang read everything OG Qingfang had to say. He still wasn't sure why the OG had passed so suddenly. He'd woken in the man's body, apparently just waking from sleep. He called out, but no one answered. Some kind of muscle memory made him snap his fingers and just like that- a candle ignited.

From there, it was obvious he had transmigrated.

He's several months in, now, and Mu Qingfang likes to think he's doing a pretty okay job. There's just one thing he's worried about.

Luo Binghe.

Shen Shixiong's scapegoat for everything. The abuse magnet. The Protagonist who will someday rip his Shixiong to shreds, kill Zhangmen Shixiong and raze Cang Qiong mountain sect to ash.

So. Mu Qingfang has a vested interest okay?

He's been doing a lot of work trying to figure out where in the timeline they are. Liu Qingge? Still alive, and actively being a pain in the ass. No demon invasion yet. The Immortal Alliance Conference is set for four years hence.

But it feels like he's running out of time.

So he does what this body does best, apparently, and starts making lists. Lists of things that he can use, things that he can *do* to avert the terrible future coming for them all.

The *first* thing on the list? Try and help Luo Binghe. But he needs a good excuse to be on Qing Jing peak, otherwise Shen Qingqiu will have a shit fit. Mu Qingfang's only met the man like twice and both times were at Peak Lord meetings in which Mu Qingfang said nothing and simply observed.

He expected Shen Shixiong to be handsome, of course he would be! Aren't villains always supremely good looking? Except Shen Qingqiu looks more like a tired professor than a would be Scum Villain.

Anyway, Peak Lord meetings are kind of an exercise in not being discovered by his martial siblings. Mu Qingfang sits through them with a kind of horrified fascination. He's not sure what he expected but it's certainly not Liu Qingge and Shen Qingqiu shouting each other down while Yue Qingyuan rubs his head and looks pained.

In addition to his duties as Peak Lord, Mu Qingfang also runs some free clinics down in the local towns. One day while he's holding a general clinic down in one of the nearby towns, he cares for several street kids. They're all so young! Terribly skinny, and so fucking *tired*. He cares for young mothers who are absolutely exhausted, with no kind of help. Everyone is poor and hungry and dealing with preventable illnesses. The millennial who's riding in Mu Qingfang's body *hates* it.

He hates knowing that most of these people would be so much better off with modern medicine. Fuck, Mu Qingfang would give anything for some fucking penicillin, and even more for some actual over the counter cold and allergy medicine.

Grimly, he amputates a foot here. A great toe there. This farmer got his arm scratched by a bird and now it's black and necrotic all the way up to the elbow. Mu Qingfang's only been a doctor for a few months but he recognizes necrotizing fasciitis immediately. Flesh eating bacteria he mentally translates as he prepares the patient for surgery.

His disciples scrub the patient's skin while Mu Qingfang prepares the acupuncture needles for analgesia. Unfortunately, he doesn't have any kind of ventilation so he can't really sedate the patient as much as he wants to. The leg will be numb but the poor guy will be wide awake. It's horrific, and Mu Qingfang makes it a point to get it over with as fast as possible.

The Lord of Qian Cao peak is more efficient than ever, his disciples tell their peers, back at the mountain. Shizun is so knowledgeable! So revolutionary in his medical practice!

Really though, aside from the medical files downloaded into his brain, Mu Qingfang just has rudimentary medical knowledge gleaned by osmosis and constant use of the internet.

Wash your hands. Wash the patient. Use high heat to destroy bacteria. Cover your mouth when you sneeze or cough.

It's simple. But here, in PIDW-land? Earth shattering!

But gods above, Mu Qingfang *hates* chopping body parts off of people.

One afternoon, the healing pavilion door slams open so hard it puts a long vertical crack in the heavy wood. Liu Qingge stomps in with a disciple under his arm. The Qian Cao disciples scatter in an effort to direct Liu Shibo to an empty treatment room.

The Bai Zhan peak lord dumps the kid on the exam table and then turns to leave, but Mu Qingfang, a veteran of six whole months now, is wise to his ways and captures the elusive Liu Shixiong.

"Shixiong," Mu Qingfang calls urgently, and sends out his qi in the shape of a lasso, which catches around Liu Qingge's wrist. (This is a technique that OG Qingfang had created for

sewing tiny blood vessels together, but it's pretty great for stubborn Shixiongs as well.)

"What." Liu Qingge says flatly, crossing his arms over his chest and inadvertently dragging Mu Qingfang a few steps closer.

"Liu Shixiong," Mu Qingfang says, "It's been some time since your last exam, and I need to check your meridians."

Surprisingly, Liu Qingge's glare relaxes into something a little less murdery and he reluctantly extends an arm.

Running a trickle of his qi through someone else's cultivation system is now second nature and a cursory exam reveals that Liu Qingge is doing fine. Mu Qingfang smiles and says, "Everything looks great, thanking Liu Shixiong."

Liu Qingge stares at him for a long moment.

"What happened to your disciple, Shixiong?" Mu Qingfang hurries to ask before the War God runs off again.

Snorting a little, Liu Qingge says, "He. Wasn't paying attention and tripped over another kid. I thought he might have broken something." He looks away and for a moment, Mu Qingfang's eyes linger on the sharp angle of Liu Qingge's jaw. "You're always telling me to get things checked out before they become a real problem, so."

"Thank you, Liu Shixiong," Mu Qingfang says warmly, reaching out and squeezing the other man's shoulder. Inwardly, he's melting down about how FIRM Liu Shixiong's muscles are. Truly a war god! "I will take good care of your disciple."

Liu Qingge blinks, a small furrow appearing between his brows. "I…know you will," he says finally and then escapes.

Mu Qingfang treats the boy for a severe sprained ankle and prescribes an anti-inflammatory tea, warm compresses and rest for a week. Because the boy is Bai Zhan, Mu Qingfang will need to keep him here on Qian Cao where he will be looked after properly. Liu Shixiong kind of has a Lord of the Flies thing going on over on Bai Zhan, and it doesn't make a great place to recover from injuries.

A few days later, an emergency talisman calls him directly to the bamboo house on Qing Jing peak. OG Qingfang's notes state quite clearly that Shen Qingqiu only called for help if it was severe, something about a misunderstanding from when Shen Shixiong was a disciple. OG Qingfang had been trying to make up for it for years, to no avail.

He leaves a note for his head disciple and flies immediately to Qing Jing peak. He lands in front of the bamboo house and knocks twice on the door. An unfortunate looking boy answers the door. "Mu Shishu," he greets. "This one is Ming Fan, Shizun's head disciple. I found Shizun collapsed on the floor and called for you immediately." The boy wrings his

hands together anxiously. “Shizun…Shizun always has me keep an emergency talisman just in case…”

“Where is your master?” Mu Qingfang asks kindly. “I will do my best to restore his health.” He follows Ming Fan through the small house to Peak Lord Shen’s bedroom. His Shixiong has been laid on top of the covers fully dressed and appears at first glance to be unconscious.

The bedroom is open and airy with a wide window covered by a paper shade. A small talisman is attached to the shade. Squinting, Mu Qingfang thinks it’s for privacy. He has a large set of built in shelves against one wall displaying small paintings, some jade statues and of course, *books*. Mu Qingfang itches to snoop and discover what the scholarly peak lord has been reading but alas. He *does* have a job to do.

“Shen Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang greets, assuming that all patients can hear and understand him until proven otherwise. “It’s Mu Shidi. Your disciple called me to check on you and I am going to run a scan and will need to touch you to do so.”

At the end of the bed, Ming Fan watches with parted lips. Is he so out of character then? Whatever, Mu Qingfang decides.

He runs the scan and finds Shen Qingqiu’s meridians stiff and inflamed like Shen Shixiong tried to push through a bottleneck and failed. “Disciple Ming, please bring me some cool water and clean cloths.” He doesn’t actually need them, but this kid needs to do something besides hover.

“Yes, Mu Shishu.” The boy leaves.

Mu Qingfang gets to work. He perches on the edge of Shen Shixiong’s bed. Some of Shen Qingqiu’s meridians are thinned nearly to the breaking point while others are filled with blockages. Making his qi as gentle as if he was treating a child, he repairs the damage using his spiritual energy to bolster the thin meridians and sloughing away carefully at the nearly blocked ones.

“There you go, Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang says, “It’s looking much better now. “I think you’ll make a good recovery.” He lets go of Shen Qingqiu’s delicate wrist (far thinner than it should be) and then takes his hand and squeezes gently. “Shixiong, would you consider waking up for Shidi?” he asks, not really expecting a response.

To his surprise, Shen Qingqiu’s eyes slit open and Mu Qingfang finds himself being observed coldly. He gives Shen Qingqiu’s hand another squeeze before releasing it. “Hello, Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang smiles. “It’s good to see you awake. How are you feeling?”

Shen Qingqiu blinks his eyes and frowns severely. He brings a hand to his forehead. “Like I just had a qi deviation.”

“Yes, I would think so,” Mu Qingfang agrees. “It was a significant one, too.”

“Why-” Shen Qingqiu clamps his mouth shut and Mu Qingfang leans forward.

“Yes? What do you need?” Mu Qingfang asks.

Carefully tilting his head from side to side, Shen Qingqiu shifts so that he is reclining against the headboard. He meets Mu Qingfang’s eyes. “Did you do something different this time?”

Mu Qingfang blinks in surprise. “No,” he says slowly. “I don’t think so.” In reality he has no idea. OG Qingfang hasn’t treated Shen Qingqiu for nearly a year. “Do you feel differently?”

Shen Qingqiu purses his lips, brows drawn together like he’s thinking about what he wants to say. Finally, he says, “I-usually, I feel…much worse than this.”

“I shall take that as a compliment, Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang says. “Do you have a headache? Any pain elsewhere?”

Shen Qingqiu for some reason can’t seem to stop glaring holes in him. “Yes, to the headache.”

Beginning to dig through his qiankun pouches for pain relieving tea, Mu Qingfang asks, “What about other pain?”

He receives no answer, so he stops rooting through his bag and looks over at Shen Qingqiu. “Shixiong?” Mu Qingfang raises his eyebrows. For a long moment, Shen Qingqiu meets his eyes.

Then Shen Qingqiu blinks and the moment is broken. The Qing Jing peak lord looks away and crosses his arms over his chest. “Just the usual.”

Mu Qingfang gives Shen Shixiong an evaluating look. “Would Shixiong please tell me more?” Shen Qingqiu just looks confused and so Mu Qingfang adds, “What is the usual amount of pain? Where do you usually have it, how long have you had it, and what kind of pain is it?”

Having gone completely still, Shen Qingqiu is giving off the air of a trapped animal. Sensing his patient becoming alarmed, Mu Qingfang says, “I am asking because I would like to treat any lingering pain you have whether it’s new or not.” He chews his lip for a moment. “Shen Shixiong should not feel pressured to discuss anything he does not wish to. I merely wanted him to know that this Shidi is always available if Shixiong has need of him.”

There, Mu Qingfang thinks. He should probably take his leave, but…he really feels like Shen Shixiong is waiting for something. Something bad to happen. Mu Qingfang remains very still, giving Shen Qingqiu his full, undivided attention. He’s very sure that if Shen Qingqiu wanted him to go he would have been told to get out in no uncertain terms. So he waits.

After what feels like forever but is probably only a few minutes, Shen Qingqiu says quietly. “My hands hurt.”

Mu Qingfang swallows. “Did I hurt you before when I squeezed your hand?”

Looking at the opposite side of the room, Shen Qingqiu says, “Mn.”

Feeling appalled at himself Mu Qingfang says, “Shixiong. The gesture was meant to comfort you. I am sorry this Shidi caused you pain inadvertently instead. Please, may I run a scan?”

Shen Qingqiu holds out his hand, still unable to meet Mu Qingfang’s eyes.

Carefully, Mu Qingfang takes the proffered hand in between his two larger ones. This time instead of a direct exam, he allows his qi to diffuse the space between his hands. He feels the dull ache of multiple breaks which have healed imperfectly. Four phalanges are affected as well as several metacarpals. “I see,” he says slowly. “This must make it difficult to-”

“To do my job? Yes.” Shen Qingqiu says acerbically, pulling his hand back and flexing it slowly. He makes a fist and then extends the fingers.

Mu Qingfang thinks quickly. The Peak Lord of music, of calligraphy, who must also be a master at Qing Jing peak’s sword forms. Mu Qingfang raises and discards any number of treatments. No doubt, Shen Qingqiu has some arthritis from the way the bones healed. Cold, damp weather therefore, must make it worse, at least it would for a mortal.

Ah. His cultivation base is not stable, making him more prone to mortal ailments, and of course, Shen Qingqiu being quite proud he would probably like this to stay unknown. So why, and how did Shen Qingqiu come to the decision to share this with Mu Qingfang *today*?

“Some anti-inflammatory tea,” Mu Qingfang says out loud. “As well, I will send over a container of beeswax and a number of specialized warming talismans. Once the beeswax assumes a liquid form, you can dip your hand- you know what? Why don’t I just bring it by in the next couple of days and show you how to use the wax treatment?”

“You can treat it?” Shen Qingqiu asks suspiciously.

“Yes, certainly,” Mu Qingfang says. “The melted beeswax will mitigate the pain on the worse days. It…it provides some deeper feeling relief for a lot of patients. The tea is based on willow bark and-” he smiles. “You will definitely want to add some honey to make it more palatable.” He meets Shen Qingqiu’s dark green eyes. “But Shixiong, *yes*, this pain can be treated, and hopefully will improve your quality of life.”

Shen Qingqiu looks dubious and Mu Qingfang can only hope he is willing to try the treatments. “Very well,” Shen Shixiong tells him.

“What else?” Mu Qingfang asks briskly and this time receives a blank expression. He withholds a sigh. “What other pain do you have?” Inwardly, he’s crossing his fingers. Something here isn’t adding up. Shen Qingqiu’s cultivation should be much better than this. Does he qi deviate every time he tries to break through? That….would certainly explain some of the man’s anger and frustration.

As Shen Yuan, he had been so firmly on Luo Binghe’s side, even commenting on the forums that Shen Qingqiu should be castrated for his crimes. As Mu Qingfang, though, he found his Shen Shixiong was…quiet, a lot of the time. Watchful, certainly. Untrusting. He hardly seemed like a man to hang up a kid and whip him near to death.

Do not approach Shen Shixiong from behind, make sure he knows of your approach OG Qingfang wrote.

He seemed more like a man that was always waiting for an attack to come at any moment.

OG Qingfang seemed like he suspected something really *bad* had happened to Shen Qingqiu, something so bad the other man could barely bring himself to seek treatment or allow anyone at all to get close to him. Just-

A lightbulb goes off in Mu Qingfang's mind.

Just his very sweet female disciple, Ning Yingying. Who was definitely not a threat of any kind to her Shizun.

Shen Qingqiu doesn't seem inclined to answer. But again, he hasn't thrown Mu Qingfang *out*. Finally Shen Qingqiu sighs. "Another time perhaps, Mu Shidi," he says with a tone of finality.

"Can I do anything for you before I take my leave?" Mu Qingfang asks. It's a pretty standard question.

Breathing out in a huff, Shen Qingqiu says, "Why are you being like this today?"

Mu Qingfang's eyes go wide. He literally has *no idea* what Shen Shixiong is talking about. "Why am I-?" He frowns and leans forward. "I-this is just how I *am*," he replies, mystified, searching Shen Qingqiu's face.

"Fine," Shen Qingqiu waves a hand in the air, and Mu Qingfang stands and turns to the doorway. "It suits you," Shen Qingqiu says abruptly. He gestures to his mouth and Mu Qingfang understands.

He laughs. "The mustache? Oh, it just seemed like it was time for a change, that's all." He meets Shen Qingqiu's dark green eyes again. "Feel better Shixiong," he calls and takes his leave.

I will scrupulously abide by medical ethics

Chapter Summary

He recognizes a little kid getting beat up when he sees it. The poor thing is curled up into a ball, protecting their abdominal organs, and covering up his head. Mu Qingfang curls his lip, pushes off the earth and flies down there to put a stop to it.

“What’s the meaning of this!” He snaps, and hilariously, the *three* boys who are kicking the shit out of one little kid, freeze in their tracks. As one, the three boy’s heads snap around and stare at him, looking horrified.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mu Qingfang closes the door to Shen Qingqiu’s house quietly behind him. He doesn’t mind bringing what is essentially a paraffin warmer back here. It was one of the first things from the modern world that he recreated. As Shen Yuan his joints had been terribly painful, and as he grew up, sometimes developed red and painful nodules on his hands that prevented him from being able to do much. He took his medicine and treatments and then beat the hell out of his hands as a keyboard warrior. Well, Mu Qingfang muses, no regrets.

Anyway, one of his occupational therapists had introduced the warm wax treatment, and what a game changer! He hoped that as Mu Qingfang, he could make Shen Shixiong’s life a lot more comfortable. He honestly doesn’t want to think about how painful playing the guqin must be. Or, fuck, even just simple calligraphy.

He wanders slowly across Qing Jing peak, lost in his thoughts. He hears someone crying out close by. Frowning, Mu Qingfang uses his cultivation to increase his hearing. Now he clearly hears grunting and the sound of scuffling. The main walkway he’s on is part of the manicured grounds in that it’s raised up and very level. To his left, there’s a sharp drop off and it’s here that Mu Qingfang finds himself peering over to see what’s going on.

He recognizes a little kid getting beat up when he sees it. The poor thing is curled up into a ball, protecting their abdominal organs, and covering up his head. Mu Qingfang curls his lip, pushes off the earth and flies down there to put a stop to it.

“What’s the meaning of this!” He snaps, and hilariously, the *three* boys who are kicking the shit out of one little kid, freeze in their tracks. As one, the three boy’s heads snap around and stare at him, looking horrified.

Oh, what the fuck, Mu Qingfang thinks. “Ming Fan,” he says sharply. “Is this the care you give your Shizun? Were you too busy to bring back the items I asked for?”

The unfortunate looking head disciple pales. He gives his two companions a quick glance and Mu Qingfang prepares to be lied to. “Mu Shishu-” Ming Fan starts, but Mu Qingfang doesn’t want to listen to his bullshit.

“Quiet,” Mu Qingfang snaps. He straightens to his full height. “Ming Fan, I suggest you bring to your Shizun the items you were supposed to.” He turns his attention to the other two boys shuffling their feet. “As for *you two*-” Well. He can’t send them to Shen Qingqiu right now. “Present yourself to the reflection hall and kneel for two hours. I will send a message to one of your hallmasters and update them on the situation. Go. Now.”

The three teenagers run off, and Mu Qingfang approaches the boy still on the ground. He looks at Mu Qingfang suspiciously. “Hello Shizhi,” Mu Qingfang says gently, crouching down. “I am Mu Qingfang, peak lord of Qian Cao peak. Will you allow me to examine your injuries?”

This child on the ground looks about ten years old. He’s quite thin, and covered in bruises. Mu Qingfang assumes that if he was able to, he’d be standing already. The child’s eyes are a deep black, rimmed with thick lashes. His hair is pulled back into a ponytail, but it’s not slick at all, and tiny little curls have escaped, giving him a fluffy halo. His white and teal Qing Jing disciple’s robes are filthy at the hems, and one of the sleeves is torn.

Aw, shit, Mu Qingfang realizes. This is the Protagonist. But right now he’s just a dumb kid who keeps getting beat up. “What’s your name, child?”

The kid swallows and peeks up at Mu Qingfang. Cute! “This one is Luo Binghe, Mu Shishu.”

“It looks like you’re having a tough day,” Mu Qingfang says, and Luo Binghe’s eyes fill with tears. Ah! Don’t cry! Mu Qingfang resists the urge to give this little bun a hug!

Luo Binghe nods, tears glimmering but not falling. He looks down and his shoulders hitch.

“I’d like to check your meridians,” Mu Qingfang continues, still speaking gently. “May I see your wrist?” Luo Binghe thinks about it, and then extends his arm. A quick check reveals- wow, that’s weird!- mild damage to some meridians. Thinning in certain places, but odd thickening in others. It’s actually very similar to-

A cold sensation sweeps across Mu Qingfang’s neck. “Do you happen to have your cultivation manual with you, Luo Shizhi?”

“Yes, Shishu,” Luo Binghe says, and produces it from a fold in his inner robes.

Mu Qingfang eyes it a moment before flipping through the pages. A fake. But an *old* fake. He closes his eyes for a moment. OG Qingfang had mentioned something in his notes about fake manuals back when he was a disciple- Shit. Mu Qingfang will have to go back and find the one referencing them, he can’t quite remember the deal.

“Besides the sprained ankle,” Mu Qingfang says, “You have a few older injuries, and it looks like you need to eat more.”

Luo Binghe looks firmly down at the ground.

Sighing, Mu Qingfang forms a message array in his palm. “Shen Shixiong, I found one of your disciples injured in the forest and am taking him to Qian Cao for treatment. I will have one of my disciples return him afterwards.” His qi transforms into a crane and flies off.

“Come along, Bing-er,” Mu Qingfang says, standing and scooping the boy up into his arms. Now that he has a good excuse, he cuddles him close and Luo Binghe squeaks. “Hold on.” Mu Qingfang manifests his sword and flies directly back to the healing pavilion on his peak.

Back on Qian Cao, he takes Luo Binghe directly to an exam room. His head disciple quickly follows behind him.

“Shizun,” Wu Yanshin says, “What do you need?” She looks to be in her early twenties, but apparently has been head disciple since the Qing generation ascended to their current positions. Wu Yanshin wears her black hair tightly braided back in a single thick tail of hair. Her sleeves are already tied back.

“This is Luo Binghe,” Mu Qingfang explains with a smile. He runs a hand over the boy’s head. So Soft! Fluffy! “He ran into some trouble this morning and needs a full exam.” Tapping a finger against his lips, he continues, “Needs more protein, I’d wager, and we’ll need to give him several jars of bruise cream. More importantly,” he says, giving Wu Yanshin a serious look, “He’s been trying to cultivate with a fake manual.”

The head disciple’s eyes widen for a moment before her face returns to impassivity. “I see.” She looks over at Binghe and smiles. “Hello Luo Binghe. I’m going to do a deeper exam of your meridians while Shizun observes.”

Luo Binghe, who to this point has remained silent and watchful, glances at Mu Qingfang, who meets his eyes and nods a little. “Okay.” He answers quietly.

Wu Yanshin takes his wrist and closes her eyes while she examines his meridians. After a few minutes, she straightens. “Shizun, he-” She looks troubled.

“Speak,” Mu Qingfang says. “What are your findings?”

She says slowly, “Luo Shidi’s meridians are thin in some places, and forming blockages in others. Left without treatment, and continuing to cultivate incorrectly, could severely limit his progression.” She looks directly at Luo Binghe. “Fortunately, Shizun discovered this early enough that you should make a full recovery.”

Mu Qingfang pats the boy on the head. “See Bing-er? Not to worry. Wu Yanshin will get you all sorted and then have someone take you back to Qing Jing in the morning.” He leaves Binghe in Yanshin’s care but the boy calls out just when Mu Qingfang reaches the door.

“Mu Shishu! This Binghe thanks you!” Luo Binghe is sitting up on his knees on the exam table looking extremely earnest.

“You’re very welcome,” Mu Qingfang says, smiling. Such a cute little white lotus!

The rest of the day is busy, as would be expected since Mu Qingfang took a detour to treat Shen Shixiong.

He gets some disciples from Bai Zhan with dislocated joints (How delightful, Liu Shixiong must be in residence!), a couple of disciples from Ling Yu with wounds resulting from a minor stampede of blue winged deer.

One senior disciple of Qiong Ding peak presents with poisoning (aphrodisiac pollen) and Mu Qingfang sends him over to the building next door which specializes in treatment. One of things that freaked the newly transmigrated Shen Yuan out, was learning that treatment of Aphrodisiac poisoning was an extremely important specialty. OG Qingfang had done his time in the trenches back in the day, per his notes.

From what Shen Yuan gleaned, OG Qingfang (among his many accomplishments) was a Master of dual cultivation. *Current* Mu Qingfang was still very firmly a virgin, and he was not looking forward to the day he had to prescribe *sex* with himself or someone else. Just thinking about it made him feel squicked.

Thankfully, OG Qingfang was an anal retentive *freak* who wrote *everything* down. During his disciple days, OG Qingfang didn’t really have a choice on whether or not he could refuse to dual cultivate with people for lifesaving papapa. That was one of the first things he altered as Peak Lord, and there was a very bitter entry about it.

Nowadays, the aphrodisiac response team was volunteer only, and the medics had to go through some mandated therapy before and after dual cultivating with a patient. Unfortunately, Mu Qingfang really was the most skilled at it, so if something came up, he was going to get tapped to tap that!

He pushes that uncomfortable thought to the back of his mind and keeps working.

The next day is a clinic day that he spends in one of the towns in the valley, diagnosing things that he knows full well what they are and has exactly zero ways to treat them. With the downloaded information in his brain, Mu Qingfang easily recognizes cancer, or ‘wasting disease’ of various organs.

Specifically farms that raise chickens and other birds for eggs and meat. The part of Mu Qingfang that used to be Shen Yuan thinks “cryptococcus pneumonia” at some of these folks, but he can’t remember that being a thing except with immunocompromised folks like he had been.

The rheumatoid arthritis that Shen Yuan had been treated for specifically stomped his immune system to bits, so his doctors were always telling him about what pets he couldn’t have (No cats, no birds) and would he like a nice fish?

Anyway, Mu Qingfang can recognise some stuff from modern life, even if when *he* was living there he didn’t have enough knowledge about. It’s weird, Mu Qingfang thinks between

patients. He never actually wanted to be a doctor, but he supposes his parents would be quite proud if he could tell them.

The worst patient of this clinic day is an older woman who has stopped making urine. He has no way of fixing her kidneys. Mu Qingfang *hates* having to tell someone that they're dying. What she needs is dialysis and a kidney transplant but instead she gets the xianxia equivalent of hospice care.

He explains to her and her family that over the next week or so she will become more and more tired, and sleep more. She should eat lightly if she wants, and limit her fluid since her body has no way to excrete it. He leaves her with medicine to ease her pain and returns to the sect, feeling like a complete and utter *failure*.

Wu Yanshin is nowhere to be seen, and one of the other senior disciples catches up with Mu Qingfang while he's walking down the hall to his office. "Shizun," he calls, "Zhangmen Shibo sent a message requesting a visit this evening."

Mu Qingfang closes his eyes. He's exhausted and the last thing he wants to do is have a heart to heart with Yue Qingyuan. And that's what this request is. Basically, the sect leader is asking for therapy even though he doesn't use those words. Clearly, Mu Qingfang needs to just have him *make an appointment*. He fights back his annoyance and runs a palm over his face. "How long ago did the request arrive?"

"Two hours ago."

Damn it!

Mu Qingfang turns right around and heads out to Qiong Ding. He already has a good idea of what Zhangmen Shixiong wants to talk about, and he will be damned before they do. Why do his martial siblings have to be so annoying?

On the flight over, he tries to settle his mind. Flying above Qing Jing peak reminds him that he needs to check up on Shen Shixiong the following day. He never received a response to the message he sent about Luo Binghe, so he has no idea what to expect from Shen Qingqiu. Hopefully, he's not too pissed about it.

Yue Qingyuan is at least in his office and not his residence. He provides Mu Qingfang with tea and they both kneel at the table. Mu Qingfang takes a polite sip of tea and waits.

This is the hardest thing, when he just wants to hammer the man and find out what's bothering him. Instead he must endure Yue Qingyuan's dithering. Eventually, Yue Qingyuan smiles and says, "I understand you visited with Shen Qingqiu yesterday?"

Mu Qingfang meets his eyes. He arches an eyebrow and says nothing. Maybe HIPPAA isn't a thing here except *yes, it is!* because Mu Qingfang says it is! Flatly he says, "I am not discussing his medical information with you."

The sect leader deflates. After a moment he regroups enough to ask, "Was he well when you left?"

This time, Mu Qingfang doesn't bother to try and cover his sigh. What's Yue Qingyuan gonna do? Fire him? "Shixiong. I am not discussing anyone's medical information with you."

Admitting defeat on that topic at least, Yue Qingyuan says. "Mu Shidi, please forgive me. You know we knew each other as children and at one point were very close."

Mu Shidi actually *doesn't* know that because OG Qingfang neglected to put that little tidbit in his great big book of everything! So now Mu Qingfang is stuck pretending like he knows what Zhangmen Shixiong is talking about. He hums noncommittally instead and tries to look interested. Honestly, if he knew as part of his transmigration experience he'd be providing *therapy* to people, Shen Yuan might just have taken a pass and moved on to the afterlife, where presumably he could at least *sleep late*!

Yue Qingyuan decides to start reminiscing about when he and Shen Qingqiu were slaves together and-

WHAT?

Mu Qingfang has developed a pretty good poker face since his arrival and it takes everything he has to keep it in place. It gets worse though, because Yue Shixiong recounts the story of how he had to leave Shen Qingqiu behind, promising to return for him.

But he wasn't able to, and that, apparently led to the complete fracturing of their relationship.

Mu Qingfang has the terrible feeling that OG Qingfang knew about this and at some point tried to helpfully meddle, possibly by suggesting to Shen Qingqiu that he try and listen to the sect leader's explanation--fuck. If that's what happened, he can just imagine how Shen Qingqiu took that. Still, it's only conjecture on Mu Qingfang's part. He'll have to go through OG Qingfang's notebooks more carefully sometime soon.

Eventually Yue Qingyuan stops talking and looks at Mu Qingfang expectantly. Mu Qingfang clears his throat. "Are you looking for advice or did you just want me to listen?"

Blinking in surprise (Did the OG not ever do this? Weird!) Yue Qingyuan says slowly, "I would appreciate Mu Shidi's wisdom."

Mu Qingfang leans forward. "Look. You can't force Shen Qingqiu to forgive you." He ignores the gutted expression Yue Qingyuan gets. "Have you tried ever *explaining* what happened? Because it seems to me like Shen Shixiong thinks you left to go cultivate and forgot all about him. And you can't really blame him for feeling that way! Because he has no other information telling him anything else!" He closes his mouth hard realizing he's been shouting at the sect leader. "Forgiveness."

Zhangmen Shixiong looks like he's been hit over the head. He blinks rapidly and his mouth hands open. "He-you think Shen Qingqiu thinks *I forgot about him?!*"

Closing his eyes for a moment, Mu Qingfang takes a deep breath. He's tired. He's hungry. He's dirty and needs a bath and he is not in the mood to babysit the sect leader any more. "What else is he to think? I strongly suggest you either *explain* it to him, in *detail*, or never

bring the subject up again." Standing up, he adds, "It's time to shit or get off the pot." He turns and leaves.

Tomorrow he'll have to write an apology letter or something but that is a problem for future Mu Qingfang. He returns to Qian Cao and collapses into his bed so he can do this all again tomorrow.

The next day though, Mu Qingfang actually does feel better. He meditates and eats breakfast and then starts preparing the wax warmer for Shen Qingqiu. He uses fresh beeswax with some dried lavender, collects his talisman and then heads out.

Qing Jing peak is, as the name suggests: *Quiet*.

He has no idea where Shen Shixiong might be so he starts by knocking on the door of the bamboo house. Unfortunately no one answers. Pressing his lips together, Mu Qingfang decides to find a disciple and ask where his Shizun might be.

He heads down the walkway to where most of the classrooms are. These are set up much like a courtyard- an inner area of bamboo, shade trees and benches with a few statues here and there. The learning pavilions are placed at the cardinal points.

Here he finds a few disciples studying in the inner yard. They greet him easily enough and direct him to one of the music classrooms two courtyards over where Shen Qingqiu is holding lessons.

Mu Qingfang finds it surprising that Shen Shixiong is able to teach today considering he is likely still recovering from his qi deviation and should be resting.

As he gets closer he hears the sounds of guqins followed by a period of silence and then—

Oh my, Mu Qingfang thinks in dismay at the scathing commentary from Shen Qingqiu. Does he have the emotional strength for this today? Perhaps it's not too late to return back to Qian Cao and try again tomorr-

"Mu Shidi," Shen Qingqiu says from *right* next to him, and Mu Qingfang jumps.

This fucking guy!. "Hello Shen Shixiong," Mu Qingfang says mildly, as Shen Qingqiu glares down at him. That's another thing! Why is Shen freaking Qingqiu, so fucking *tall*! Mu Qingfang isn't exactly short but Shen Qingqiu has a couple centimeters on him *at least*. "I was hoping to catch you and go over the procedure we discussed yesterday." He doesn't need OG Qingfang's notes to tell him to be very discreet about Shen Qingqiu's business in public spaces.

"Very well," Shen Qingqiu answers, after giving him a hard look. Mu Qingfang just smiles and follows the Qing Jing peak lord to his residence. Once inside, Shen Qingqiu offers no refreshments. Rude, even by modern standards. Whatever!

"Okay," Mu Qingfang says, settling at one corner of the table while Shen Qingqiu sits directly to his right. Mu Qingfang starts pulling stuff from a qiankun pouch. The wax warmer

is a beautifully stained wooden bowl in which he places large pieces of hard beeswax. The Acacia bowl itself is fairly deep and the edges sanded into a lovely rounded shape. Even if you didn't use it for wax treatments, Mu Qingfang muses to himself, it's still lovely. "Once you have the wax ready, it generally takes two of the special warming talismans to melt everything to a temperature that is warm enough to provide relief, but not so hot that it burns." He risks a peek at Shen Qingqiu and to his satisfaction, he's watching closely, brow furrowed.

"Shall I walk you through a treatment?" Mu Qingfang asks. Shen Qingqiu presses his lips together but nods once.

He activates the two talismans and then waits for the wax to melt.

"Is that lavender?" Shen Qingqiu asks, pinning Mu Qingfang with his dark green gaze.

"Yes," he says. "I thought you might appreciate that more than the unscented wax. I tend to find that too--medicinal. But if you have a preference, I can certainly arrange that for you," he finishes easily.

Once it's melted, Shen Qingqiu says, "So what, exactly, am I supposed to do now?" He crosses his arms over his chest, tapping his fingers restlessly.

Mu Qingfang brightens, and explains how he's supposed to dip his hand in up to the wrist, then slowly remove it, allowing the wax to set for a few seconds, then repeat the process several more times until the entire hand is covered in nice warm wax. "Once that's done, I like to wrap the affected limb with a warm towel and try to relax a bit." He smiles, and Shen Qingqiu looks away. "Would you like me to assist you this time?"

For a long moment Shen Qingqiu looks askance. Then he says quietly, "Do as you wish."

Holding out a hand, Mu Qingfang waits until Shen Qingqiu reaches out and lays his hand in Mu Qingfang's palm. "Very good, Shixiong. Now, if you would allow me to guide you in… that's it, I hope that feels soothing for you. All right now slowly pull out-" Too late he realizes the double entendre but Shen Qingqiu ignores it, following his directions. "Yes, just like that," Mu Qingfang encourages. "Now go ahead and let your hand sink in deep, feel the warmth all around you…"

He lifts his gaze from the wax warmer to Shen Qingqiu's face which has become rather flushed. "Is it too warm?" He asks solicitously.

Sounding oddly strangled, Shen Qingqiu manages, "It's…it's fine."
"Mn. You're doing very well," Mu Qingfang praises, "Let's go again…"

Once Shen Qingqiu's hand is entirely encased in warm wax, Mu Qingfang produces a soft towel from his qiankun pouch. It emerges still steaming, as he'd put it in right from the laundry this morning. He wraps the towel carefully around Shen Qingqiu's hand and then helps him position the wrapped limb on the table.

He watches Shen Qingqiu stare down at his own hand. That line is back between his brows.

“Now what?” Shen Qingqiu asks, meeting Mu Qingfang’s eyes.

Smiling, Mu Qingfang says, “Now you *relax*.” He’s not expecting his martial sibling to look at him like he just said something insane. If this were one of Shen Yuan’s brothers he’d expect a crack like, ‘Have you met me?’

But he’s not, and he doesn’t. For a moment, just a moment, Shen Yuan misses his brothers *fiercely*. He misses Meimei, so freaking much. He blinks, and he’s Mu Qingfang again, displaced millennial stuck in a stallion novel, pretending to be a doctor.

Something of this must show in his face because Shen Qingqiu’s brows drop even lower. Shixiong, surely that must feel terrible for your face? Mu Qingfang has the insane urge to press his thumb against that line and watch his skin even out. Ha! He’d be dead before his body hit the floor.

Shen Qingqiu clears his throat. “How long…should I keep this in place?”

“Ah, for an incense stick of time perhaps. Or, until you get tired of it.” My Qingfang says. “Would you like me to stay and help you remove the wax?”

Again, Shen Qingqiu gives him a long look before finally saying, “if you don’t mind.”

“Great,” Mu Qingfang says brightly. “Would you like me to get anything for you while you wait?”

Tilting his head to the side Shen Qingqiu says “No. Thank you.”

This is where having a teacup would be nice, Shixiong! It would give them both something to do besides stare at each other! “Would you, that is, I can help you do your other hand, if you want?”

“You might as well,” Shen Qingqiu says, looking away and Mu Qingfang feels more than a little triumphant.

Did OG Qingfang feel this good too, when he finally managed to help someone? Maybe he can’t get someone on dialysis but at least he can help his Shixiong. “Your hand please.”

Like before, he guides Shen Qingqiu’s hand into the warm wax. As his fingers sink and the wax reaches his wrist, the Qing Jing lord sighs, and tension appears to drain from him.

“There you go,” Mu Qingfang murmurs. “Very good, Shixiong, now pull it back out, yes nice and slow, lovely.” He focuses on keeping the wax from dripping on Shen Qingqiu’s table, so he keeps his running commentary going. “All right, let’s dip you back in, I hope that makes your hand feel better. Pain in your knuckles is the worst. Yes, like that, you’re doing well…”

Producing another steaming towel, he wraps Shen Qingqiu’s left hand up and guides it to rest on the table.

Shen Qingqiu still looks a little flushed, and Mu Qingfang wonders if he’s running a fever. “Shixiong, may I touch your face with my hand? I’d like to check your temperature.”

Green eyes widening, Shen Qingqiu averts his eyes. “Mn.”

Mu Qingfang reaches over and lays the back of his hand against Shen Qingqiu’s forehead. “Well, thankfully, your skin feels fine. Perhaps a heat reaction from the wax,” he muses. He adds, “I think, unless you had help, you should probably do one hand at a time.” He waits for Shen Qingqiu to look at him. “Is it helping at all?”

A vague look of confusion flits briefly across Shen Qingqiu’s face before his expression settles into the more typical blank mask.

Shen Qingqiu fixes his eyes on the table. “I…it’s helping.”

Chapter End Notes

You Guys. ARE SO INSANE!!! Almost 300 kudos?!?! On ONE (1) CHAPTER?! JFC I am chewing the walls here at home! As a reward, and because I literally had nothing to do at work today except *write* I am posting this now and honestly, I love all of you!!!

LQG: have you guys noticed anything weird about-

YQY: *Just got torn a new asshole* NOPE- let's never mention this again

SQQ: *is pampered and praised* by Mu Shidi for the first time EVER in his life.
SQQ: EVERYTHING IS FINE, now stop TALKING about it

I'm determined to strive diligently to eliminate human suffering

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: Minor character death (really minor) Like I made an OC and then immediately killed him clown.gif

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The following week, Mu Qingfang is called urgently to Ku Xing peak to treat a deviating disciple. According to OG Qingfang's notes, this particular peak is usually the least troublesome, except for the tendency of their disciples to attempt shoving through any bottlenecks. Fortunately, most of them recover just fine.

Unfortunately, in this case, the young man does not. Somehow he was not discovered until he was already bleeding from his seven apertures, and Mu Qingfang curses when he arrives and takes in the scene.

Blood everywhere, the Ku Qing peak lord frantically passing qi, while other disciples stand around wringing their hands and looking scared.

Mu Qingfang kneels next to the poor disciple and scans him. He takes a deep breath. The kid's cultivation system is destroyed, there's no chance of recovery. For a moment, he wishes OG Qingfang was here to tell him what to do. Somehow in the six months since his arrival, this is the first time Mu Qingfang won't be able to save a sect member.

It feels terrible.

The Ku Xing peak lord, Xiao Qingshen is holding the young man in his arms. "Mu Shixiong- is there any hope?"

Mu Qingfang says, meeting Xiao Qingshen's eyes, "He will not be able to cultivate, his meridians are destroyed, and so his body is unable to cope with the massive blood loss. The most I can do is keep him comfortable." His grim tone sends the cluster of disciples into tears.

Xiao Qingshen decides that he wants the young man (Huang Jiaoli) to remain in his residence for the short remainder of his life. Mu Qingfang does not say that moving him would only hasten his death. Xiao Qingshen stands with the disciple in his arms and takes him to the young man's bedroom where he gently places him on the bed. Mu Qingfang produces a clean cloth and starts cleaning the blood from Disciple Huang's face.

Huang Jiaoli's breaths begin slowing and Mu Qingfang curses. He retrieves his acupuncture needles and places them so that Huang Jiaoli will feel no pain, although he was likely beyond that point. Still. He's taking no chances. "Talk to him." Mu Qingfang urges. "He may be able to still hear you." Hearing, he knew, was the last sense to leave and the first to return.

Mu Qingfang stands back as the Ku Xing peak lord takes the young man's hand and speaks softly. "Jiaoli, you're okay…just keep breathing…everything is fine…" Xiao Qingshen's voice breaks a little. "You did so well, Shizun is *so* proud of you."

Huang Jiaoli's breath becomes farther and farther apart, while his inhalations become so shallow that his chest barely rises.

"I'll send word to your family," Xiao Qingshen says, closing his eyes. "They will be taken care of." He takes a deep breath. "It's all right to let go and we will meet again in the next life."

Like Huang Jiaoli was waiting for permission, he exhales one final time.

The silence in the room feels oppressive. Mu Qingfang forces himself forward, does a final scan. "He's passed." He lays a hand on Xiao Qingshen's shoulder and squeezes. "I am so sorry for your loss."

Xiao Qingshen stands up abruptly, turning on Mu Qingfang and knocking his hand away. Mu Qingfang takes a step back in alarm.

"Why did it take so long for you to come?" Xiao Qingshen demands.

Mu Qingfang blinks. "I came as soon as I got word-"

"If you got here sooner, he should have lived!" Xiao Qingshen shouts.

He knows, okay? He *knows* that Xiao Qingshen is in shock, that he likely doesn't mean what he's saying right now. But Mu Qingfang is not a fucking doormat, and he doesn't appreciate being yelled at when he's also pretty fucked up from losing this young man.

"You're in shock," Mu Qingfang says flatly, holding his hand behind his back, acupuncture needles pressed between two fingers. "I suggest you make arrangements for your disciple. I will take my leave."

The Ku Xing peak lord lunges at him, and Mu Qingfang's body reacts on instinct, sending the needles forth and rendering Xiao Qingshen unconscious. Fuck his life, just what Mu Qingfang needs is *another* patient. He sends a message to Wu Yanshin, asking her to fly over immediately.

One of the bystanding Ku Xing disciples says, "Mu Shixiong, please forgive Shizun. Huang Da-Shixiong was our head disciple."

Mu Qingfang closes his eyes for a moment. "This is not the first time someone has reacted like this to a loved one's untimely death, and it won't be the last. Death is difficult, especially

since he was so young." He looks the disciple in the eye and says genuinely. "I am sorry for your loss. Truly."

Yanshin arrives to take over. Mu Qingfang gets the fuck off that peak, returning to his office on Qian Cao. On autopilot, he fixes himself some tea. One moment he's staring down at the tea service and the next moment he leans down and sweeps the entire thing off the table. The teapot hits the wall and shatters. The cup explodes, sending shards of ceramic outward and embedding some into his palm. "FUCK!"

Some days he really hates his job.

He deals with his hand using a simple burst of qi to pull the shards out and then watches as the multiple small wounds heal over. First he wipes the blood from his hands and then cleans the mess. Once he's done with that, he returns to his desk, where he leans over with his head in his hands.

Mu Qingfang doesn't get any more work done that day.

Early the next morning he receives a message from An Ding peak's head disciple, requesting he come and treat Shang Qinghua who was found unconscious in his leisure house a few minutes earlier. Mu Qingfang sighs and shoves the rest of his green onion pancake into his mouth. Someday he would like to finish a meal without bolting it down like a wolf!

An Ding peak is right next door, but he uses his sword for expediency's sake. Per the head disciple, he went to meet with Shang Qinghua for their daily morning meeting. The Peak Lord was found unconscious not far from the front door.

By the time Mu Qingfang arrives, Shang Qinghua has already been carried to bed. A quick scan reveals low qi levels, borderline malnutrition and general exhaustion. He lets out a relieved breath and starts transferring spiritual energy. "Not to worry," he tells the head disciple, whose name escapes him at the moment. "This is general exhaustion. Do you know if Shang Shixiong has had any sleep or food in the last couple of days?"

"Answering Mu Shishu, Shizun has been off peak for three days and just returned this morning."

Hmm. *That's not suspicious at all* Mu Qingfang thinks. "You may return to your duties," He tells the disciple. "Your Shizun will wake shortly."

The disciple, clearly eager to return to his work, leaves immediately.

When Shang Qinghua's qi level approaches something close to normal, he jerks awake with wide and fearful eyes. "Ah! Oh. Hi, Mu Shidi. What are you doing here?" He looks around, and his eyes widen when he notes his surroundings.

Mu Qingfang gives Shang Shixiong an unimpressed look. “Your disciple was quite worried about you. They found you collapsed this morning and feared for your life.”

Shang Qinghua attempts tugging his wrist out of Mu Qingfang’s grasp and Mu Qingfang says irritably, “Stop that, you will need more qi unless you’d like to collapse again before lunch.”

Making a face, Shang Qinghua says, “Shidi is grumpy today.”

Mu Qingfang makes an effort not to frown. Shang Shixiong would be grumpy too, if he had Mu Qingfang’s day yesterday! “Apologies.”

“No, it’s fine.” Shang Qinghua says. “Are you okay?”

Clenching his jaw for a moment, Mu Qingfang forces it to relax. He does his best to channel OG Qingfang. “Of course,” he replies mildly. “It’s just been quite busy lately.”

Surprisingly, Shang Qinghua does not drop the subject. “I get it. I really do, it’s just--you know, I *hear* things, and-” He pauses, biting his lower lip consideringly. “I heard about Ku Xing. I’m really sorry.”

Qi transfer complete, Mu Qingfang sits back. “Yeah, it sucked,” he says without thinking.

Shang Qinghua narrows his eyes. “Does Shidi have any recommendations for me?”

Snorting a little, Mu Qingfang says, “The usual. Shang Shixiong should *eat* at least once a day, and make sure to get at least six hours of sleep.” OG Qingfang had long given up trying to get Shang Qinghua sufficient sleep and food, and instead opted for a compromise. Unfortunately, he was equally boneheaded as the rest of his martial siblings.

“Yeah, well, Mu Shidi should take care of himself, too.” Shang Qinghua eyes him speculatively. “You know what they say about putting on your oxygen mask on first, right?”

“Yeah,” Mu Qingfang says automatically, and then- “Oh,*shit*.”

“I knew it!” Shang Qinghua crows. “You’re a transmigrator too!”

Mu Qingfang turns his head to the side, cracking his neck. “Kind of. I don’t know. I just woke up here about six months ago.”

“What missions do you have?” Shang Qinghua says eagerly, like he’s been *desperate* to talk about this.

Doesn’t he know the first rule of the Transmigrators Club is you don’t talk about it? “None,” Mu Qingfang says. “I did get a download of a bunch of medical information but that’s it.” He doesn’t mention the carefully prepared notebooks of information, which made it possible to be up to speed basically on arrival. Now that he thinks about it…that’s…a bit weird isn’t it?

Like. Why would OG Qingfang take the time to write out all that stuff *which he already knew*?

Shang Qinghua sits up in bed, reclining against his suspiciously soft pillow. “Well, count yourself lucky then, bro, because I have a System in my head and trust me, it is *not fun*.” He runs a hand over his face muttering something like, “Mission goal *survive*, go fuck yourself.”

“Anyway,” Mu Qingfang says, “You really do need to eat and rest more, Shang Shixiong, lest you work yourself into a qi deviation.” He leans in, unable to resist trolling *just a little*. “I would hate for something to happen like it did to that poor disciple on Ku Xing.” He smiles.

Shuddering, Shang Qinghua says, “Fuck, that’s creepy. Just so you know? Mu Qingfang was a very placid dude! Like. Totally unflappable! Could not be flapped! But *you*...” He chuckles a little, then says slyly, “I heard that you’ve been making nice with Shen Qingqiu.”

Making a face, Mu Qingfang protests, “All I did was *treat* that man! That’s my duty as his physician!”

“Uh-huh,” Shang Qinghua drawls, unimpressed. “I *also* heard that Yue Qingyuan’s been trying to talk to Shen Qingqiu for a couple days now. Any idea what that’s about?”

Internally snorting, Mu Qingfang says simply, “No idea.” He stands up to leave and Shang Qinghua frantically grabs his hand. Mu Qingfang zaps him with some qi and the other man jerks his hand back, offended. “Do I really have to tell you not to grab people? Are you five?”

“Wait, we need to talk about stuff!” Shang Qinghua protests.

“We really don’t,” Mu Qingfang says, and leaves before Shang Qinghua tries to keep him longer. Mu Qingfang has shit to do! There’s a peak lord meeting later this week, and he is supposed to have clinic today! Could the rest of the sect members stop trying to die? Mu Qingfang would really appreciate it, actually!

Honestly, he’s beginning to understand why OG Qingfang dipped out. My gods, his life is fucking *crazy* busy. It’s like being the sole attending physician for an entire city! In the name of his sanity, Mu Qingfang opts to walk back to Qian Cao. He’s not far from the rainbow bridge, and the peak is a direct connection which simplifies things.

Back at the healing pavilion, he walks through the ward and checks on the patients. Most of the current crop are there for stuff like dehydration after a series of unfortunate events on a mission. There’s a couple broken bones courtesy of Liu Shixiong. A Ling Yu disciple fell from a barn rafter while practicing qinggong and broke his tibia and fibula. Yu Qingxin, the peak lord, brought him in directly.

A Xian Shu senior disciple is next door receiving care for aphrodisiac poisoning. She unfortunately has a severe case, and required urgent treatment, but already had a partner so what she really needed was *supplies* and privacy.

Mu Qingfang expects her full recovery within two or three days. After rounding, he retreats to his office, where to his surprise, he has a visitor.

“Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang greets.

Shen Qingqiu twists in his chair and arches an eyebrow. “Mu Shidi. You seem to have been busy.” The Qing Jing peak lord is dressed impeccably in dark teal outer robes, over at least four inner layers. His hair is drawn back from his face in a simple ponytail, held in place by his crown and pin. A dark teal ribbon wraps around the pin, fluttering down his back, along with the long length of his black hair.

Mu Qingfang moves to sit at his desk. “I would offer tea but I’m afraid I’m waiting on a replacement tea service.” His eyes linger on the spot of blood he’d missed while cleaning up his desk the other day. Once settled, he says, “What can I do for you, Shixiong?”

Dark green eyes narrow speculatively. “I heard you paid a visit to the sect leader recently.”

Really? Now he’s getting this from Shen Qingqiu too? Mu Qingfang rubs his forehead. “I’m not discussing anyone’s medical records.”

“Yes, so I’ve heard,” Shen Qingqiu says a little sharply. “Yue Shixiong said you told him the same thing.”

Okay, so? What exactly is the problem?

“I suppose I have *you* to blame for sending Yue Shixiong all over the mountain attempting to track me down?” Shen Qingqiu, although his voice is calm, is giving off majorly pissed off vibes.

“For fucks sake,” Mu Qingfang mutters. “I suggested to Zhangmen Shixiong that he speak with you directly about any misunderstandings that may exist between the two of you. Because that is the *adult* thing to do. You know. *Talk* to people? Maybe tell them exactly *why* you’re pissed off at them so they have a chance to explain. Or maybe you could tell someone just how bad you fucked up at something, something that might have had a lot of consequences for a lot of other people. But what do I know? I’m just a doctor.”

“Mu Shidi certainly seems…assertive these days,” Shen Qingqiu coldly observes.

“Believe me Shixiong, you *don’t* want me to tell you how great this week is going. You really, *really* don’t.” Mu Qingfang has no energy to be angry today. He’s just so *tired*. He misses the days when all he had to do was lay around and write scathing comments.

Dealing with an RA flare seems positively *restful* compared to what he’s been doing since his transmigration.

Interestingly, Shen Qingqiu deflates. Just a little. For a few long seconds they just watch each other over Mu Qingfang’s desk. Then Shen Qingqiu shifts in his chair and looks away. “Zhangmen Shixiong finally confessed to me.”

Brightening, Mu Qingfang smiles. “Oh, that’s great news! I’m so happy for you two!” Wow, are they like, ‘together’ now? Good for them! He never would have thought Shen Qingqiu was gay, though.

Frowning, Shen Qingqiu blinks twice. “What are you-” He rolls his eyes. “It was not a *love* confession, Mu Shidi!” He rolls his eyes. “Have you always been so-? Anyway. As I was *saying*, Yue Shixiong confessed to me about …about why…”

Realization dawning, Mu Qingfang hurriedly nods. “Oh, *that*! Okay, good.” He’s still kind of waiting to figure out what Shen Qingqiu wants though. Did he just pop over for a friendly (for him) chat?

“How are your hands doing?” Mu Qingfang asks, scrambling for conversation topics.

Shen Qingqiu straightens a little. “Improved.”

Unable to prevent a satisfied smile, Mu Qingfang says, “Great.”

Shen Qingqiu sniffs. “Well. I suppose you should join me for tea sometime soon, since you’ll be waiting for a replacement tea set for months, no doubt.” He frowns. “What did you say happened to yours?”

I threw it at the wall because I let a young man die, Mu Qingfang does not say. It would be really nice if he had someone he *could* say it to, though. Having to keep bottling up all his feelings and words like this…doesn’t feel great. It kind of feels like…if he started to let some of this out, all of it would come out, and some of the things he’s had to see in the last six months…

Maybe that’s why OG Qingfang wrote everything down. To keep himself sane.

“Shidi?” Shen Qingqiu prods.

Mu Qingfang brings himself back to the present. “An accident,” he says, tone strained.

Clearly Shen Qingqiu isn’t buying that if the skeptical expression is any indication. “I have a free afternoon in two days if you would care to join me at my peak.”

Is that a clinic day? No, no, today was supposed to be one but the senior disciples will have to deal without him. “That should be fine, barring anything unexpected.” He kind of wants to knock some wood and maybe throw some salt over his shoulder, just in case. “While you’re here, can I scan your meridians?” Mu Qingfang asks. Shen Qingqiu can be tricky to get a hold of, so he has to take advantage while he’s got the man in sight.

Heaving a deep sigh, Shen Qingqiu extends his arm, even tugging his sleeve up so the pale skin of his wrist is exposed. “Thanking Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang says, and lays his fingertips to Shen Qingqiu’s skin.

Hmm. His heart meridians feel better, less inflamed. Ling Dao and Yin Xi specifically are nearly back to normal! The thinned parts in particular have improved, and the severest blockages have a lot more breathing room. Mu Qingfang suppresses the urge to fling his hands into the air in celebration. “That’s much better, Shen Shixiong,” he says, relieved. He uses his qi to clean up what he can, clearing almost all of one of the worst blockages in Shen Qingqiu’s chest. “There,” he says. “That should help.” Mu Qingfang lets out a long breath.

Shen Shixiong's face appears to relax a bit and his shoulders drop a centimeter. He inclines his head in thanks. After a moment he says slowly, "My youngest disciple, Luo Binghe. When your disciple returned him to my peak, she informed me that he had been cultivating with a fake manual."

Wow, Mu Qingfang's kind of shocked that Shen Qingqiu brought this up unprompted! Is this character growth? Since Shen Qingqiu is the adult responsible for the kid, Mu Qingfang doesn't think HIPPA applies here. "Yes," he agrees. "His meridians showed similar damage as your own, actually."

Shen Qingqiu curls his lip. "As one would expect, given that someone gave him the same manual *I* was given as a disciple."

Uh. WHAT? Someone on Qing Jing peak gave *Shen Qingqiu* a fake manual?! Mu Qingfang clenches his fist, outraged. What the fuck is *wrong* with people?! "Well, *that's* infuriating," he finally manages to say somewhat calmly.

"Yes." Shen Qingqiu agrees, obviously perturbed. "I wanted to let you know I took care of it, before you went running to the sect leader."

Mu Qingfang squints at him. "I…assumed that you would?" OG Qingfang, what did you *do*?! In the next moment, Mu Qingfang realizes that it simply never occurred to him that Shen Qingqiu *wouldn't* take care of the issue. He'd kind of *forgotten* about the Scum Villain thing.

In Shen Yuan's defense, it's a lot more exhausting to be Mu Qingfang than it *ever* was to be Peerless Cucumber, bitching on the forums. He's basically immersed himself in being a doctor, and hasn't been thinking about the Plot in the least! It's a problem for Future Mu Qingfang!

Shen Qingqiu looks like he very much wants to say something cutting. He doesn't though, and just stands up. "I will take my leave." He pins Mu Qingfang with his gaze. "My residence, two days hence, midafternoon." With that, he turns in a sweep of robes and hair ribbons, and departs.

Was that man always such a drama queen?

After Shen Shixiong leaves, Wu Yanshin enters. She sits in the chair that's probably still warm and gives Mu Qingfang a very direct look. "Shizun."

"What is it, Yanshin?"

"Shizun, when was the last time you took a full day off?" She asks, arching an eyebrow.

Snorting, Mu Qingfang says, "Wait, do I get any? News to me." He smiles a little, but his disciple does not.

"Shizun," She complains, leaning forward and tapping a finger on his desk. "You made this rule! You can't make everyone *else* take some time off and then try to work yourself into the

ground!" She meets his eyes. "Shizun, it's been months. You're getting burned out."

The one thing that OG Qingfang didn't write about was taking any time off. "Remind me, Yanshin, what's the rule about time off?"

She frowns, then straightens in her chair, subtly adjusting her face and her voice. "Yanshin, you have to take care of yourself, *first*. No one else is going to do it for you, and we need you in top health to be able to care for patients. Once you start burning out, you lose your empathy and are less effective as a physician." She waggles a finger at him. "At least one week every three months! No skimping!"

Mu Qingfang's lips twist. "What idiot came up with that?"

"Shizun!" She laughs. "Is my impression so terrible? You know you used to tell us that all the time."

Oh, haha, *he's* the idiot. Or at least, OG Qingfang was.

"I'm serious, Shizun!" The smile fades from her lips. "Xiao Shishu felt guilty about his reaction to Huang Shidi's death. After we prepared Huang Shidi's body for burial, Xiao Shishu asked me to pass on his apologies."

Mu Qingfang looks down. "I'm not sure I would have reacted any better if it was *my* head disciple," he says honestly. "It's-" He shakes his head. "I wasn't holding a grudge."

"I know you wouldn't, Shizun." She looks determined. "But I also know that you take these things hard." She reaches out and pats his hand.

It makes Mu Qingfang realize that for all the impersonal touching he does to other people in the course of his job…no one else touches *him* very much. Finding that his throat is suddenly tight, he says, "Yanshin is a good girl. Go on, leave this old man be for a while. I will think about what you've said."

"You'd better," She says fiercely. She stands. "I'm returning to the wards. The Bai Zhan disciples keep trying to escape, and they need close monitoring."

After she leaves, Mu Qingfang closes his eyes, leaning back in his chair. He has much to think about.

That evening, Mu Qingfang returns to his residence, a small cottage not far from the main Healing Pavilion. For an urgent, middle of the night call, he could roll out of bed and be there in less than two minutes.

The house that's become his is nice enough, Mu Qingfang supposes. The OG Qingfang kept the main part of his home quite neat, but his bedroom was a mess. Robes everywhere, medical reference books everywhere, and *plants*. OG Qingfang (somehow, in his spare time-Shen Yuan thinks) liked keeping a garden.

Qian Cao had the large garden which supplied the majority of the commonly used herbs and plants. It was right behind the Healing Pavilion, and the youngest disciples were responsible for maintaining it, since nothing growing there was particularly dangerous. There were other such gardens scattered through the sect of course. Probably a good idea, in case of accidents or crop failure or something.

However, behind the *Peak Lord's* residence, OG Qingfang kept a *huge* garden, where he grew things like Chuan Wu, Cang Er Zhi, Ma Huang. These plants required meticulous care when preparing them for use, and could become toxic quite easily. If ingested improperly, most of them caused things like arrhythmias, heart attacks, renal failure, and liver failure. Of course, the plant that Shen Yuan recognizes as Foxglove could kill you if you ate it. He has no idea what it's called here, but anyway, it lives in the Poison! area.

He had several plans from the Demon realm that Shang Shixiong had somehow sourced, and OG Qingfang had propagated. Several potent aphrodisiac plants were in residence under a barrier array. These were needed to synthesize antidotes.

Mu Qingfang thought the coolest things were the plants that were actively poisonous. OG Qingfang must have thought so too, since he had so many of them.

Anyway, the point is OG Qingfang had *lots* of plants in the bedroom. A horticultural genius, he had created self sustaining planters for them as well as supplemental light sources.

The air in the bedroom was always fresh, lightly scented by flowers and overturned earth. Mu Qingfang recognizes the Ever Blooming Jasmine vine over by the window, and he thinks that's a Heliotrope beside it. The small purple flowers are delicate, and the scent reminds him of summer.

He makes an effort that night to meditate before bed, and he finds it helps to sink into it deeply. Tension falls away with each breath, and finally, he sleeps.

Chapter End Notes

Chuan Wu -Aconite
Cang Er Zhi-Xanthian powder
Ma Huang-Ephedra Sinica

MQG is out here working himself to the bone while his disciples are side eyeing each other like, "WTF is wrong with Shizun?"

SQH: OMG Another transmigrator!! SWEET!! We Should be FRIENDS!!!

MQF: Pass, LOL

Enhance Human Health Conditions

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings:
-General medical stuff, descriptions of heart failure, frostbite injuries, description of minor surgical procedures and wound care, descriptions of dementia

Not gonna lie, we're starting to see some cracks in MQG/SY's facade here.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Okay! Mu Qingfang thinks. He's ready for clinic this morning! He scarfs down breakfast (congee with bits of chicken or something and several good strong cups of tea) then flies down to today's town with Xie Yanmei, a senior disciple who was in the same cohort as Wu Yanshin. They looked nothing alike-Yanmei favored a high ponytail braided all the way down, but Mu Qingfang sometimes gets their names mixed up anyway.

Xie Yanmei has warm brown eyes and a bright smile. Her bedside manner is *perfection* and she used to treat Shen Qingqiu when they were all much younger. (OG Qingfang wrote that Xie Yanmei was one of the few healers allowed to treat his prickly Shixiong in Shen Qingqiu's early days in the sect.)

Today they're starting in the middle of the town and then traveling around to some of the local farms to check on the people there. Farmers in whatever the setting, have a disturbing tendency to NOT seek help. Shen Yuan had some friends that ended up becoming doctors and every time a farmer presented to the emergency room it was a big deal. What's your chief complaint?

"Well, the tractor ran over my leg, and so I laid in the fields until I caught a horse by the halter and it dragged me back to the barn. I would have come in earlier but I had to feed the pigs."

Mu Qingfang wishes he was kidding.

Anyway, his first patient is a lovely elderly woman who reports shortness of breath at night. She often wakes up feeling like she can't breathe. Her pulse is thready and weak. Her legs are quite swollen to the point there's tiny bubbles of fluid filled blisters on her ankles.

Heart failure.

She says that she's still urinating, so her kidneys are probably okay. For now. Mu Qingfang gives her pills made from foxglove. "Take one of these every morning, and try to use less

salt.” In the modern world, Foxglove was the basis for a well known heart medication called digoxin. It helps the heart pump better which hopefully will help this patient.

What she really needs is a strong diuretic, but what she’s *getting* is the Xianxia equivalent: dandelion and parsley teas.

The elderly woman smiles (she’s missing a lot of teeth) and gifts him some fresh eggs. Mu Qingfang thanks her genuinely, mentally rubbing his hands together. They will go well in his congee tomorrow, he thinks gleefully.

He treats a bunch of middle aged men with similar complaints: unable to sleep because they keep needing to pee overnight. Not to worry! Mu Qingfang has herbs for that enlarged prostate!

Two street kids wander in and ask if the healers can look at their feet. A boy and a girl, possibly siblings, who survived the winter but suffered frostbite on their toes. Mu Qingfang’s bad feeling gets worse when the kids unwrap the rags from their feet and he sees the extent of the damage.

Xie Yanmei takes over the little girl, carrying her behind a screen for more privacy.

Mu Qingfang crouches in front of the young boy. “Are they hurting you?” He asks gently, unsurprised when the kid nods. “It’s hard out there,” Mu Qingfang says.

The boy doesn’t say anything, just shrugs. Once the rags are off completely, Mu Qingfang finds that several toes on each foot have developed gangrene.

“It’s scary,” the child whispers.

“I know,” Mu Qingfang says. “What's your name?”

“Fang Liu.” He says. “That’s my sister Fang Duyi with the other Immortal Master.”

“Well, Fang Liu, you’ve been very brave.” Mu Qingfang says. “Now. Do you want to know what’s wrong? Or do you just want me to try and fix it?”

“What’s wrong.” The boy answers quietly, meeting Mu Qingfang’s eyes and then darting his gaze away.

“All right. So when people spend a lot of time in very cold weather, it makes your actual skin freeze.” He decides to skip the mini lecture about *cells* and keep it as simple as possible. “The extreme cold can make some of the skin on your toes die back, kind of like a plant will get dieback on the tender growth in a hard freeze.”

Fang Liu nods. Perhaps he has worked on a farm or out in the woods.

“I’m afraid that I have to get rid of the dead skin. But I’ll make sure it doesn’t hurt at all, okay?” Mu Qingfang asks, patting the boy’s leg. “First, I’ll need to wash the food to reduce the chances of infection.”

“Don’t, Immortal Master, my foot is so *dirty*-” The young boy protests.

“This is all normal,” Mu Qingfang tells him. “Please do not worry about it, I am very used to this. That’s why I’m a healer.” He prepares some pain medicine which the boy takes while Mu Qingfang starts washing the kid’s foot. Once it’s clean, he uses his needles and blocks the nerves so Fang Liu will feel no pain. He debrides all the dead skin away with a sharp knife until the tissue underneath is beefy red and healthy.

Mu Qingfang layers his hands over and under Fang Liu’s foot and starts pumping spiritual energy into the wound, speeding up the growth of new skin. As he concentrates, the edges of the wounds start pulling together. When he has approximated the wound edges as much as the skin will tolerate, he applies a thin healing ointment to the area and wraps it with clean bandages.

“Is your family around, Fang Liu?” Mu Qingfang asks, removing the needles now that the wound is dressed.

Looking at the ground, Fang Liu stares at the ground and shakes his head.

“Very well,” Mu Qingfang says. He looks toward the screen. “Disciple Xie, do you need assistance?”

Xie Yanmei appears from behind the screen. “No, Shizun. Fang Duyi is all ready.” She crosses her arms expectantly.

“Good,” Mu Qingfang says crisply. “Please call back to the peak and ask your disciple siblings to send volunteers to take these children to the ward for observation.” To Fang Liu, he says, “Young Master Fang, would you like to stay in the Cang Qiong sect for a while? I find myself in need of disciples who like working with plants. Once you’re healed of course. You and your sister are welcome.”

Fang Liu grabs his hand and lowers his forehead to touch it. “Yes *please* Immortal Master!”

What a good boy! Mu Qingfang pats him on the head and tasks Xie Yanmei with finding the children something to eat while they wait for their ride. Mu Qingfang continues seeing patients.

About two hours later, Liu Qingge shows up, looking harassed.

Mu Qingfang and Xie Yanmei exchange glances. “Liu Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang greets. “How-unusual to meet you so far away from the sect.”

Liu Qingge presses his lips together for a moment. “I was at Qian Cao visiting my brats when your message came in. I wasn’t doing anything important. I can fly fast, so.”

Did Liu Qingge come all this way just to be a taxi? “How thoughtful! This Shidi appreciates the effort.”

Liu Qingge glances around at the line of commoners waiting to be seen, and then back at the two children sitting at a low table that Yanmei scrounged up. The kids have already eaten two baozi each. “Are you always this busy?”

Mu Qingfang laughs. “Yes, Shixiong. Come, I will introduce you to my new disciples.”

Both kids are appropriately awestruck by the very pretty war god. After Mu Qingfang explains to them that this older brother will take them back to Qian Cao peak, and his head disciple will get them settled, they finally agree to let Liu Shixiong fly them back on his very large sword.

Liu Qingge manifests Cheng Luan, and it is not only *large* but *shiny* as well. Liu Qingge makes it hover a few centimeters above the ground.

“They shouldn’t bear weight on their feet, Liu Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang warns. “Are you okay carrying them?”

Snorting loudly, Liu Qingge rolls his eyes. “Of course,” he scoffs and scoops up each child and settles them on each hip. “Hold on around my neck, but don’t choke me.” He at least says this much less gruffly than usual.

Fang Duyi squeals in delight as they lift off the ground, and positively *shrieks* with joy when they start moving. Fang Liu just holds on and looks determined.

Mu Qingfang catches Liu Qingge smiling smugly, and remembers he actually has a much younger sister. In moments, the Bai Zhan war god and Mu Qingfang’s new disciples disappear into the horizon.

Xie Yanmei remarks on the way back to the sect, “Shizun, it’s been such a long time since you brought home any strays. This disciple was beginning to wonder if you were feeling all right.”

Sass! Why is he getting so much sass from these kids! Mu Qingfang says easily, “Well, I like to keep you all guessing. Can’t have everyone getting too comfortable.”
His characterization must be spot on, because Yanmei groans. “Shizun! No one has missed that! I’m begging you, no more surprise exams.”

Ha! Apparently, Mu Qingfang’s been too easy on his disciples! “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The Fang siblings have a room on the main ward and Wu Yanshin has done her job well. The kids are dressed in plain white Qian Cao patient gowns. From what Xie Yanmei implied on the trip back, OG Qingfang apparently was known for ~~stealing~~ rehoming street kids as well as the occasional sex worker.

Turns out a good number of the support staff of Qian Cao peak are former patients that OG Qingfang wanted to offer a home and a way to provide for themselves.

You were a good egg, Qingfang, Shen Yuan thinks. It's a lot to try and live up to. He's really not sure how great a job he's doing. Seems like the most important part of being a doctor is showing up every day, and giving a damn. He can do that, at least.

Mu Qingfang indulges himself and flies over to Zui Xian. He recently treated some senior disciples for minor burns after a cooking accident (don't put water on an oil fire, boys, how did you not know this?!) and they owed him a favor because he hadn't notified their Shizun about it.

He tracks them down easily enough- like Qian Cao, the Peak of Zui Xian has a main pavilion which is much like a commercial kitchen. Except in this case, there's separate areas for experimentation with combining spiritual techniques with food preparation. The results can be, uh, interesting…

Anyway, Peng Li and Ma You bring out several dishes they've been working on, and they have a nice meal. These two kids entered the sect together. Peng Li's family was from Nanjiang and his father was a chef for a noble family there. Ma You had been a street kid who had managed to earn food by helping out in a local tea house. He started washing dishes and eventually learned how to make some dishes. He was paid with food, board, and basic clothes.

They met while climbing the great staircase of Qiong Ding peak, goading each other to keep going. Luckily, having bonded by the time they got to the top, they both were chosen for Zui Xian. Although Peng Li tells Mu Qingfang, he had an offer from An Ding as well. The young man wrinkles his nose when he relays this information.

Mu Qingfang thinks about Shang Qinghua working himself into exhaustion, apparently on the regular. He arches an eyebrow and tells him not to disrespect other peaks.

He digs into his beef and spicy noodles with relish. After he's finished the disciples present him with a perfectly prepared water chestnut cake. Mu Qingfang nearly expires from delight. The transparent cake has a golden hue, and the outside is crispy. The entire thing is somehow sweet, nutty and tart all at the same time.

It's *amazing*! "Many thanks," Mu Qingfang says, wiping his mouth mournfully. "I've never had water chestnut cakes before. Delicious."

Ma You, who had been squirming in his seat watching Mu Qingfang eat, looks thrilled. "Anytime Peak Lord Mu wishes, this disciple can prepare some for him!"

Mu Qingfang smiles. What good children!! "Ah, thank you, this old man appreciates the thought. I thank you for the delicious and filling meal, and more importantly, such lovely company."

Peng Li and Ma You exchange glances. Peng Li says, "It is the very least we could do after Mu Shibo took such good care of us." He extends a hand, the one which had been burned almost to the bone. The skin is clear and pink, with minimal scarring. Peng Li flexes his hand into a fist and then extends the fingers wide. "I owe Peak Lord Mu my livelihood."

Standing up, Mu Qingfang leans over and pats him on the head. “I am just glad you both have recovered well. Now remember-”

“No water on grease fires!” Peng Li and Ma You chime in unison.

Mu Qingfang nods. “That’s right. Thank you again for the meal. I enjoyed it immensely.”

Back at Qian Cao, Mu Qingfang frantically attempts to divert his mind from thinking the dreaded thought: *Gosh it sure is QUIET today*. Furthering this effort, he visits what he has internally named the Healing Garden. It’s the one right behind the main Healing Pavilion, where the young disciples take care of weeding and watering the plants.

Although Shen Yuan has been living Mu Qingfang’s life for six months or so, he still hasn’t learned the names of every disciple on the peak. He’s normally so involved with the most advanced injuries, or called to attend other peak lords if they have so much as a cold.

So he spends the better part of the afternoon on his knees in the wide rows of the garden, helping the young ones pull weeds. Having not been so up close and personal with their peak lord since the last disciple selection, Mu Qingfang finds himself the beneficiary of the children speaking what feels like every single thought that enters their minds.
He learns about which Hallmaster is the most liked and disliked. He learns about one instructor who *farted* while teaching a class, and then severely punished the kids for giggling about it.

Mu Qingfang makes a mental note to talk to the teacher. He absolutely would have snickered too!

The children compete to see who can pull the most weeds from their row, and afterwards Mu Qingfang pronounces the winner. Not an idiot, he declares them all equal and then sends them off to get washed up and clean robes.

When he returns to his residence, Mu Qingfang thinks this is the best he’s felt since his transmigration. Something about being under the bright sun, working with the plants and earth has settled him. Made him feel like he’s *really* here, like this is his *life* now.

It’s not a bad life, he thinks, soaking in a nice bath while fragrant incense burns silently on the windowsill.

Right before dusk he gets a message from a junior disciple requesting assistance in the Extended Care section of the peak. There’s an entire group of small cottages built around a large open courtyard. It has its own kitchen and staff to provide meals to residents.

Many of the people living there worked for the sect- kitchen staff, stable hands, even some retired teachers that were experts in their subject (such as herbology, or animal husbandry to name just a few) but were not cultivators and so grew to be elderly and frail, needing ongoing care and supervision for their own safety.

OG Qingfang had been assigned to that section for many years as a junior disciple, and even now, was well liked and missed by the patients there. Shen Yuan didn't know that much about taking care of old people, but he was hopeful he'd be able to wing it successfully.

An old man with dementia had developed intermittent agitation. Normally, the assigned Qian Cao junior healers were able to redirect the patient. Alas, dementia is a progressive disease, and this elderly gentleman was becoming a bit difficult.

"Shizun," the disciple greets in relief. He bows. "Disciple Tao Meng. Shizun, Hallmaster Xiang Xue has been calling out, and calling out. We have tried all the usual interventions, and this disciple did not want to sedate him if there was no need."

Yes, good boy! Sedating dementia patients was fraught with risk and to be avoided if at all possible. "Hallmaster Xiang?" Mu Qingfang asks, while he's thinking of ways to comfort a cranky old man.

"Yes, Shizun," Tao Meng says. "Before I entered the Sect, Hallmaster Xiang was a mortal physician. He was incidentally rendered blind during a mission the previous Peak Lord was a part of. Since he was no longer able to work, the previous Peak Lord brought him back to Qian Cao. Hallmaster Xiang was an expert at wound care, and his lectures were enjoyed by all." Tao Meng looks down. "He only retired in the past couple of years when his memory started getting bad."

Well. At least Mu Qingfang wasn't the *only* one bringing home strays. Apparently this was a longstanding Qian Cao tradition. "Thank you for the report," Mu Qingfang says. "I will go visit him now." He gets directions to the correct cottage and heads directly there.

The closer he gets, the louder the shouting is.

Mu Qingfang knocks on the door. "Hallmaster Xiang, it's Mu Qingfang, I'm coming in to see you."

He finds the house overturned, rubbish and debris everywhere. The crunch of ceramic is absurdly loud in the sudden silence. Shattered vases and flower remnants litter the floor.

"Xiang Xue?" Mu Qingfang calls, using his cultivation to improve his senses. He hears shallow breathing in the other room. He wanders back through the airy front room, past a bathing chamber and finally arrives at the modest bedroom.

Xiang Xue is sitting on the floor in the back corner of the room between the bed and the side wall. "Who's there?" He demands, and his voice is high, upset.

A blind man with dementia living alone. What could possibly go wrong? Mu Qingfang thinks. "It's Mu Qingfang, Xiang Xue. I heard you weren't feeling well and came to see if you needed any help."

The old man laughs harshly. "I need to go home! Why have you brought me here?! Where is my mother? Mother!!" Xiang Xue's face crumples, and he starts crying.

Mu Qingfang moves closer, speaking in a soft voice. “Xiang Xue, do you know where you are?”

A head shake. Xiang Xue crosses his arms over his chest. His patient robes are slightly skewed and Mu Qingfang sees his clavicle prominently, appearing to be barely covered by skin. He’s so thin. Mu Qingfang wonders if Xiang Xue has been forgetting to eat.

“I’m going to come sit next to you if that’s all right,” Mu Qingfang tells him. “Is that all right?”

“...Okay,” Xiang Xue says, sniffling.

Mu Qingfang’s eyes sting. He *hates* dementia and the way it steals *everything* from a person. “I’m moving closer, and now,” he sits down, “I’m right beside you. You’re at the Cang Qiong mountain sect, and I am Mu Qingfang, one of the healers here.” They’re shoulder to shoulder now, and Mu Qingfang nudges the older man gently to let him know where he is. “You’ve been teaching at Qian Cao peak for many years now.”

“How come, how come I can’t *see* anything?” Xiang Xue says. “I keep waking up in the dark, and no one comes when I call!”

“That sounds scary,” Mu Qingfang says. He imagines it, like a waking nightmare. Alone, in the dark, with no hope of rescue. He doesn’t know if Xiang Xue even knows how old he is. So he asks. “A-Xue, how old are you?”

Xiang Xue frowns. His eyebrows, thick and white, draw close together. “I…I think I’m… ten?”

“That young?” Mu Qingfang says smoothly. “I thought you were older than that. You’re very brave for such a young boy.”

“Where is my mother?” Xiang Xue asks, sounding broken hearted, and Mu Qingfang is a terrible person because he’s glad this old man is blind and can’t see him crying.

“She’s at the market,” Mu Qingfang says, keeping his voice steady with an extreme act of will. “She sent a message up the mountain the other day, and asked me to keep an eye on you for awhile.”

Xiang Xue exhales with relief. “Oh,” he says, “that’s fine then. I was worried when she didn’t answer.”

“Of course you were,” Mu Qingfang says. “Anyone would be. You’re a filial boy to worry about your mother.”

“Can we go for a walk?” Xiang Xue asks, sounding much brighter. Much younger.

Mu Qingfang wipes his eyes. “Of course we can.” But first, some housecleaning. He sets A-Xue up in a chair with a stack of towels that he can fold. Then, Mu Qingfang gets to work straightening up the small cottage, sweeping the debris up and making it safe to walk around again.

He helps A-Xue get cleaned up and combs his thinning white hair before putting it in a simple braid. Slowly, they walk around the courtyard, A-Xue holding onto Mu Qingfang's arm.

"I bet you feel better just being outside, hmm, A-Xue? I should work on spending more time outdoors myself." He stops so A-Xue can feel one of the large tree trunks. Xiang Xue's fingers are crooked and swollen at the knuckles.

Shen Yuan's hands used to look like that, before.

"I miss my mother too," Shen Yuan says, and the world does not crash around him. Xiang Xue seems to have retreated into his head again, perhaps a sort of catonia. For a long moment, it's *Shen Yuan* looking out from Mu Qingfang's eyes and he evaluates Xiang Xue with a millennial's discerning gaze.

"I think we should do better for you," Mu Qingfang murmurs. "Maybe having you guys living by yourself isn't the best." He chuckles lowly. "Maybe *I* shouldn't be living by myself anymore.

"I don't know what to do when I'm not working," Mu Qingfang confesses. Xiang Xue's eyes are closed, but his shuffling steps move steadily. "I'm trying so hard to be someone else, I have no idea who I *am* anymore." They're the only ones in the courtyard. Why is that? How come none of the other residents are getting some fresh air? Of course, it's nearly dark, and he hopes the rest of the patients are getting ready for bed. Do they come out in the morning maybe?

He'll have to ask Yanshin to look into it.

"Whoops, watch out for that root," Mu Qingfang says to Xiang Xue. "This tree grew so tall the roots lifted up the walkway stones. You'll want to pick your feet up higher, yes, exactly like that, good job."

For a while, the only sound is the light breeze moving through the leaves. It's peaceful. A blueish hue settles over Qian Cao mountain when the sun sinks below the horizon. The sky still has a hint of pink at the edge. It's a shame A-Xue can't see it.

"Ge-ge, I'm tired," A-Xue says, whining a bit.

"Yes, I imagine so. It's been a long day, and you're such a little boy." Mu Qingfang brushes his hand over the top of A-Xue's head where the hair is sparser.

When they get back to the small house, Tao Meng is waiting. Mu Qingfang nods at his disciple. "Tao Meng, this is *A-Xue*," he says meaningfully. "He's ten, and he's missing his mother, who has gone to the market."

Tao Meng nods. "A-Xue, what a brave boy! Can this disciple keep you company while we wait for mother? Perhaps you'd like a warm bath."

Xiang Xue glances in Mu Qingfang's direction. "Can Ge-ge come visit again?"

Mu Qingfang's face doesn't *crumple* but it's close. "Of course," he says. He pats A-Xue's head again. "A-Xue was a good boy for Mu Ge-ge. I know you'll be a good boy for Meng-ge as well."

"Thanking Shizun for his wisdom," Tao Meng says quietly.

Okay, OG Qingfang has GOT to have some liquor around his house SOMEWHERE. If he doesn't then…he doesn't know. Maybe he'll fly down to Shen Qingqiu's brothel and get drunk.
After a quick rummage through his cabinets yields nothing, Mu Qingfang slumps into his chair at the table.

After a moment he sits up straight. He knows *exactly* where to get some booze.

Mu Qingfang pounds on the door. "Open up, Shixiong!" He ignores the concerned looks from passing disciples.

"Bro?" Shang Qinghua asks from *right* behind him, and Mu Qingfang startles, whirling in place. Shang Qinghua peers at him, head tilted a little to the side. "Are you okay?"

Their eyes meet. "No," Shen Yuan says. "I'm not."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter made me cry when I was writing it. Dementia really is the worst. Patients can and DO forget to eat. They lose memories, they lost time, and at the end, they lose themselves.

There's a reason why health care workers tend to drink, sometimes too much.

What did you think? Come talk to me in the comments!!!

Uphold the Chasteness and Honor of Medicine.

Chapter Summary

> “Go easy on this stuff, it’s spirit wine from Zui Xian,” Shang Qinghua tells him, bringing back two jade cups from his little kitchen. He sets one down for each of them. “So. What has driven Mu Qingfang to drink?”
>
> After a moment, Mu Qingfang says baldly, “These people are *breaking* my *heart*.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shang Qinghua frowns at Mu Qingfang, pushes lightly past him to the door and then unceremoniously drags him inside. The An Ding peak lord settles Mu Qingfang at the table in the front of his leisure house. He produces two jars of wine and plonks them on the table, one jar for each of them.

Mu Qingfang breaks the seal on his jar and takes a short pull. It’s…wine, he supposes but as Shen Yuan he hadn’t done a lot of experimenting with alcohol due to medication interactions. To his surprise, there’s a sweet aftertaste, and his stomach immediately fills with warmth. He sighs and takes another small sip.

“Go easy on this stuff, it’s spirit wine from Zui Xian,” Shang Qinghua tells him, bringing back two jade cups from his little kitchen. He sets one down for each of them. “So. What has driven Mu Qingfang to drink?”

After a moment, Mu Qingfang says baldly, “These people are *breaking* my *heart*.”

Shang Qinghua sinks deeper into his chair. “Oh. *That*.” He leans forward. “Bro, uh, I don’t know if anyone has told you this, but. You’re not supposed to be *personally attending* every single free clinic the peak runs.”

Mu Qingfang blinks.

Continuing, Shang Qinghua says, “What you’re doing right now- it’s what doctors in *training* do, and they only do it for like, two week rotations! Your peak is *super* worried about you, by the way, don’t know if you’ve noticed.”

Thinking of the way Wu Yanshin sat down the other day and basically ordered him to take a vacation, Mu Qingfang says wryly, “I’ve noticed.” He wraps his hands around the wine jar.

“I mean, I kind of had it easier in a way,” Shang Qinghua says, after he takes a drink of wine. “I transmigrated as a baby, which, not fun, but-” He shrugs. “It wasn’t until I was almost a

teenager that I got the download of memories from my previous life." His eyebrows lift. "Can't imagine getting randomly *shoved* into a Peak Lord, *damn*."

"It sucks," Mu Qingfang agrees. "But at the same time- I like helping people. Today I treated a couple of street kids who suffered frostbite injuries so badly it was making their *toes* fall off. *Children*!" He shakes his head. "I brought them back with me, and if they don't have spiritual veins suitable for cultivating, my peak will employ them as gardeners or cooks or something."

He goes on, "But what *really* broke me was this old man with dementia, crying for his mother." He meets Shang Qinghua's eyes. "In his mind, he was ten. Ten years old, *blind* and living by himself." He sighs and takes a drink. "It was awful."

"What, um. What were you doing…*before*?" Shang Qinghua asks quietly.

Mu Qingfang snorts a little. "I was pretty much homebound. I had rheumatoid arthritis and so I was taking these really strong drugs to suppress my immune system. At the end…" He glances up at the ceiling and sighs. "I was in the hospital. One of my brothers came over to hang out…a couple days later he came down with the flu. I ended up in the ICU and I guess…didn't make it."

"Fuck," Shang Qinghua says emphatically.

"Yeah," Mu Qingfang answers heavily. He takes a drink. "Shen Shixiong invited me for tea tomorrow."

Shang Qinghua chokes on his drink, and hastily wipes his face with his sleeve. "Uh, *what*?"

"Yep. He was waiting for me in my office and basically *ordered* me to come for tea." Mu Qingfang straightens in the chair, wipes all expression from his face and says, "My residence, late afternoon, two days hence." He rolls his eyes a little. "And then he swanned out, all flowing hair and stuff."

Eyes wide, Shang Qinghua just *stares* at him. Slowly he says, "Shen Qingqiu…invited you over…of his own free will?"

Mu Qingfang makes a face. "Yeah? So?"

"Are you guys…friends?" Shang Qinghua asks, leaning forward.

Gesturing with one hand, Mu Qingfang says, "I don't know! Were we friends *before*?"

Shang Qinghua shakes his head. He picks at the remnants of the wax seal on his wine jar. "I don't think so. Shen Qingqiu doesn't just…invite people to his house." He shrugs. "Mostly he keeps to himself." Then his eyes narrow. "What did you *do*?"

"Nothing! And I'm not talking about any of his medical issues!" Mu Qingfang tells him so forcefully, that Shang Qinghua leans back in his chair and raises both hands in a placating gesture.

“Chill, bro. I’m not asking you to violate patient confidentiality, I’m just trying to figure out if you *changed* something.”

Skeptically, Mu Qingfang says, “All I did was treat him like a normal human being.”

Shang Qinghua sighs. “Yeah, that would do it,” he mutters, rubbing his forehead.

“What was that?” Mu Qingfang presses. He doesn’t see what the big deal was?

“Okay, wow, did you even *read* Proud Immortal Demon Way?” Shang Qinghua asks incredulously. “Shen Qingqiu was a nasty piece of work to *everyone*, and Mu Shidi was no exception.” Frowning, he adds, “As far as I know Shen Shixiong started giving Mu Shidi a hard time somewhere back when they were disciples. And before you ask, I *don’t* know what that’s about.”

Mu Qingfang taps his fingertips on the table thoughtfully. “OG Qingfang knew a bunch of secrets about all of the Peak Lords,” he says finally. “My working theory is that he knew something about the thing between Yue Qingyuan and Shen Shixiong, and tried to help them fix it.”

“Oh, yeah, that would have done it,” Shang Qinghua says. “Shen Qingqiu would shred someone that had *anything* to say about his younger years, and I mean. I kind of don’t blame him, considering.”

Narrowing his eyes, Mu Qingfang leans forward. “And what does the An Ding peak lord know of their backstory?”

Shang Qinghua rolls his eyes. “Didn’t I mention? I wrote it.”

“You…wrote --” Mu Qingfang sputters. “You’re *Airplane*?”

“In the flesh!” Shang Qinghua crows, grinning madly.

Mu Qingfang doesn’t have enough energy to even yell at this guy. He just takes another drink. He remembers Peerless Cucumber with nostalgia, having the time and energy to devote long hours reading and writing scathing commentary and meta on the forums. Oh, what a sweet summer child he was! Eventually he mentions, “Well, I did prod Yue Qingyuan to track down Shen Qingqiu and have an actual conversation about stuff. Hopefully that helped.”

Eyes widening comically, Shang Qinghua chokes on his wine. “You-!”
Snickering a little, Mu Qingfang confirms, “Yep. Told the sect leader to shit or get off the pot.”

Shang Qinghua throws his head back and laughs out loud. He laughs and laughs until Mu Qingfang can’t help cracking up with him. Finally, Shang Qinghua dissolves into giggles and then little snickers and snorts. His eyes are squinched up into tight crescents. “Sorry, sorry,” he gasps out, dissolving into giggles again. “I’m just trying to picture Yue Da-ge’s expression-”

Grinning like an idiot, Mu Qingfang says, “I didn’t wait around to see it. I literally dropped that bomb and left.” He sits up straight. “I met Luo Binghe! He is the cutest little bun in the whole *world*! His hair is so fluffy! His eyes are shiny like stars! I fixed him up a while back, good thing too, because I was able to fix his meridians before he sustained permanent damage.”

Smile fading, Shang Qinghua just stares. “...you fixed...the Protagonist’s meridians? What, from the fake manual?”

“Uh, what was I supposed to do, NOT fix them? Go fuck yourself, I fixed *his* meridians, *and* I fixed Shen Qingqiu’s. Ha!” Take that you stupid author! Mu Qingfang thinks smugly.

For some reason, this makes Shang Qinghua snicker. “Okay, I guess I understand why Shen Qingqiu wants to hang out with you.”

Waving a hand in the air, Mu Qingfang says, “Whatever! I just don’t understand why OG Qingfang didn’t do it! It wasn’t like it was that hard! Wait, why do you keep shaking your head?”

“Because you’re an *idiot*,” Shang Qinghua tells him. “Do you think that Shen Qingqiu let Mu Qingfang get *close* enough to fix his meridians?”

“What?” Mu Qingfang doesn’t get it.

“He hates men, dipshit,” Shang Qinghua says. “He suffered a lot of abuse when he was a slave, like. A LOT. He really, really hates men, but he hates them in the way that like, deep deep down, he’s *afraid* of them.”

“But he’s a badass peak lord,” Mu Qingfang says blankly.

“Yeah, he is *now*,” Shang Qinghua stresses. “But before, he was a powerless slave.” He shrugs. “I don’t know if he was sexually abused while he was a slave, but honestly, it would be more surprising if he *wasn’t*.”

Mu Qingfang takes his leave not much longer after that, thanking Shang Qinghua before he goes.

“Listen, it’s fine.” Shang Qinghua says seriously. “You really need to take care of yourself though.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mu Qingfang says. “Good night Airplane.” It’s late and he’s been drinking, so he doesn’t attempt to fly back to Qian Cao peak. It’s not such a long walk anyway, the peaks are directly connected via bridge.

He finds that his head is curiously empty for maybe the first time since his transmigration. When he gets back to his house, he drinks a large glass of water and wishes for some ibuprofen. The closest thing he’s got is willow bark tea, and fixing that feels like work right now.

Back in his bed chamber, Mu Qingfang breathes in the scent of jasmine and heliotrope. He sinks down on the side of the bed, and is about to just flop over when an idea strikes him. He uses his qi to scan his room like he would a patient and something catches on his senses.

Mu Qingfang blinks. There's an array on the wall, painted in the same color so it's not really visible to the eyes, but when qi is applied, it glows brightly. He gets up a little unsteadily, and goes over to the wall, laying a hand on it.

There's a bright flash and then he's standing in a completely different room. Okay, *creepy*, OG Qingfang! Mu Qingfang uses some qi to form a glowing ball in his hand and holds it aloft.

There's several boxes filled with papers, a much larger desk than in his office, and a humble altar which runs along the back wall. It seems to be dedicated to the martial god Xuan Zhen. Mu Qingfang's never heard of him. A closer look and he finds several small bundles of tied herbs. He recognizes Ren Shen, Dang Shen, Huang Qi and Bai Shao. Is this Xuan Zhen also a healer?

Mu Qingfang runs his hand along the top of the long wooden table holding the altar. His fingertips catch on a tiny mechanism on the underside and a shallow drawer pops out. Mu Qingfang carefully guides the whole drawer out, and shuffles through the contents. There's not much there, he finds. Just a folded over piece of paper with a letter made out to a Mu Qing.

A relative? Well, this will keep, Mu Qingfang decides. He folds the letter and tucks it back away in the drawer, sliding it back into place in its hidden compartment. He's too tired to go through all the stuff stored in here. A small amount of qi lights up the array from this side, and he lays his hand on it.

Within a blink, he's back in his bedchamber. Mu Qingfang snorts. "Qingfang, you weird bastard. What is the point of all that?" He immediately puts it all out of his mind and goes to bed.

He sleeps late the next morning. Mu Qingfang does have to circulate his qi a few times to dispel the dull headache, but overall he feels pretty okay. He bathes and washes his long black hair. Once it's dried he pulls it back into a basic ponytail and gets ready for the day. He doesn't want to do anything that requires getting dirty, so patient care and gardening are both out!

Wu Yanshin and Xie Yanmei show up on his doorstep, and Mu Qingfang invites them in. He prepares tea for them and once everyone is settled at his low table, he says mildly, "Is this an intervention?"

Wu Yanshin looks stern. "Shizun. Yanmei and I have talked and we have decided that you're taking a vacation."

Amused, Mu Qingfang smiles. “Such filial disciples I have. Has this old man been worrying you?”

“Yes!” Xie Yanmei says, determination all over her face. “Shizun, you don’t need to be attending every single clinic we run. Half the senior disciples think they’ve displeased you in some way and this is their punishment.”

“That certainly was not my intention,” Mu Qingfang says truthfully. “Shang Shixiong told me the same thing last night.”

Wu Yanshin snorts. “That’s rich coming from him,” she says under her breath.

“Shizun,” Xie Yanmei says, leaning forward. “We would like you to take at *least* take the next five days off.”

“No working, no patient care, no rounding in the middle of the night, no taking care of Xiang Xue- yes, we know about that,” Wu Yanshin says. “Tao Meng never should have involved you with that, he should have brought his concerns to the seniors.”

“You can garden with the children if you want to,” Xie Yanmei says.

“Oh, can I?” Mu Qingfang asks wryly. “That’s thoughtful of you.”

“Renshu-ge,” Wu Yanshin says seriously. “Please. We are *worried* about you. You’ve been a brother to us for so long and we *care* about you. You are *such* a good healer, but you *must* take time off. *Please*.”

Both women look like they’re close to tears. Mu Qingfang sighs. “All right. This old man thanks you both for the wisdom.” To make them smile, he says, “Besides, I am joining Shen Shixiong for tea later today.”

Xie Yanmei blinks. “You’re…Shen Shixiong *invited* you?”

“He did,” Mu Qingfang says, feeling a little smug about it. For a moment he remembers carefully guiding Shen Qingqiu’s hands into the warm wax and the way he’d relaxed when his pain improved. “He stopped by my office to personally invite me…yesterday or the day before, I forget.”

The two women exchange glances. Xie Yanmei, who had at one time been Shen Qingqiu’s healer back before he was a peak lord, says slowly, “This Yanmei is glad. Shen Shixiong was a very misunderstood man, but I can say no more than that.

Wu Yanshin adds, “And he’s quite handsome, isn’t he?” She looks mischievous.

“Yes,” Mu Qingfang agrees absently. Of course Shen Qingqiu was good looking! He was supposed to be the villain! Now that his cultivation has improved, Mu Qingfang hopes that the man is a little happier with his life.

“That’s good, Renshu-ge,” Wu Yanshin says firmly. “You deserve nice things. Now. I have already adjusted the schedule and taken you *off* everything for the next five days. Unless one

of the Peak Lords has a life threatening emergency, you will not be called."

After the Yanshin and Yanmei take their leave, Mu Qingfang feels properly scolded, but also feels warm inside. *Renshu*. He hadn't known that was OG Qingfang's name before his ascension as peak lord, and he hadn't known that the three of them had apparently been quite close.

He retreats to his office and writes a short note to Shang Qinghua, thanking him for the hospitality and the company yesterday. He follows that with a note for Shen Shixiong so he knows what time to expect him.

Mu Qingfang…actually doesn't really know what to do with himself while he waits for it to be time to fly over to Qing Jing peak. So he decides to straighten up around the house. He puts his robes away, or sends the soiled ones out to the laundry. He checks on his many plants in the bedroom. He trims some heliotrope and finds another several large chunks of beeswax.

He misses music. He misses chocolate. The internet.

Mom and Dad. Da-ge, Er-ge and Meimei.

Shen Yuan sinks down onto Mu Qingfang's bed. Now that he has time to breathe, it feels like all the suppressed grief from his other life just floats to the top of his thoughts. He closes his eyes. Breathes, and then he's Mu Qingfang again.

After a while, he leaves for Qing Jing peak.

Shen Shixiong does not greet him with a smile. Instead, he gives Mu Qingfang a critical once over, and sniffs. "Well, don't just stand on the porch. Come in, Mu Shidi."

"Thanking Shixiong for the invitation," Mu Qingfang smiles. "I have a gift for Shen Shixiong." He produces a qiankun pouch. "This Shidi thought Shixiong might appreciate a choice in scents for his wax treatments. This beeswax is scented with heliotrope, which is light and summery."

Shen Qingqiu stands unnaturally still. He looks perplexed. Then he says, "Thanking Shidi. I'm sure it will be appreciated." He tucks the qiankun pouch into his sleeve without opening it. "Please sit, I will prepare tea."

Mu Qingfang settles at the low tea table and looks around the bamboo house. It's very tidy, of course. Shen Qingqiu has various paintings on the walls, and Mu Qingfang wonders if the Qing Jing peak lord painted them himself. There's a large planter with bamboo growing near a window. On either side of it, there are matching wooden tables, quite tall but with a small surface. Fragrant jasmine incense burners adorn both tables, and silver smoke curls gently into the air. On the opposite wall, Shen Qingqiu has a set of shelves filled with various items.

Some small jade statues on one shelf. A set of scrolls on another.

It's all very…Shen Qingqiu.

When Shen Shixiong brings back the tea service, he sets it down, and then pours for them both. Mu Qingfang smiles in thanks, and takes a sip.

He closes his eyes for a moment. Perfectly brewed green tea, light and fresh. “This is lovely, Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang says.

Shen Qingqiu meets his eyes for a moment, and inclines his head. “Mu Shidi has been quite busy of late,” he remarks.

“Yes,” Mu Qingfang agrees. “This morning two of my senior disciples came to me and strongly suggested I take a vacation.”

“Oh?” Shen Qingqiu drawls. “Now that I think about it…Mu Shidi has been *very* busy for months now. Interesting, considering that was not the case *before* seven months ago.”

Okay, why does Shen Qingqiu know this? Has he been paying attention to OG Qingfang too? If so, *why*? Dark green eyes search his. Mu Qingfang replies, “I find myself at loose ends these days when I’m not busy.” He gets an idea. “Have you ever heard of a martial god called Xuan Zhen?”

Shen Qingqiu frowns. “Yes, but it’s been some time. I believe he ascended about a thousand years ago. Or something like that. Records from that time have been lost for the most part. It’s my understanding that he was also a god of healing. Before he ascended he was a commoner who received training with one of the crown princes of that age.” Shen Qingqiu presses his lips together for a moment. “If I’m not mistaken, he was known as Mu Qing before his ascension.” He pins Mu Qingfang with a steely gaze. “Why the sudden interest in ancient history?”

“Oh, when I was cleaning earlier I came across some old family papers with his name on it. My family had a shrine for him which I only have vague memories of. I was wondering if he may be an ancestor of mine. Just curious, I suppose.” Mu Qingfang should probably be concerned with his newfound facility with lying through his teeth.

“Hmm. Well, the old gods aren’t worshiped much anymore. And they were only as powerful as the strength of their believers, according to the writings from that time.” Shen Qingqiu says. He takes a sip of tea and lays his cup carefully on the table. He meets Mu Qingfang’s gaze frankly. “I had a breakthrough two days ago.”

“Congratulations,” Mu Qingfang says instantly, smiling. “How does it feel?”

Shen Qingqiu thinks about the question for a moment. “I feel…lighter.” He clears his throat. “You should know, it happened after I returned to my home after visiting your peak.”

Nice! Mu Qingfang thinks.

“Whatever you did to my meridians…” Shen Qingqiu’s voice trails off.

“I didn’t do much,” Mu Qingfang demurs. “Only shore up some thinning areas and help clear a large blockage. I would hazard a guess that Shen Shixiong’s personal work has much more

to do with the breakthrough than anything *I* did."

For the first time, Shen Qingqiu appears slightly uncomfortable. "Many years ago, you attempted to intervene between Yue Qingyuan and myself."

Oh, fuck. Shen Yuan wants to cry 'not it' but he really can't, not while wearing Mu Qingfang's skin. "Yes." he says simply. More lies! All he has are guesses!

Shen Shixiong sets his jaw. "I owe you an apology," he says, like just saying the words might actually kill him.

Mu Qingfang snorts. "Don't worry about it, it's forgotten. Really."

"Will you just-" Shen Qingqiu glares across the table. "Why are you being like this?"

Like what? He literally has *no idea* what you're talking about Shixiong! Mu Qingfang is mostly made of bullshit these days! He would really like to stop *lying* to the man!

"Look, I just wanted-I probably shouldn't have stuck my nose in your business. I truly just wanted to help." Mu Qingfang takes a chance. "You both were just so…unhappy. It was hard to watch."

Shen Qingqiu looks down into his near empty cup. He taps his fingertips on it. "Mu Shidi… you were the only one of our martial siblings who even *tried* to help us. I mean." He looks over at Mu Qingfang and their eyes meet. "Yes, you tried to help Zhangmen Shixiong. But you also tried to help *me*."

Mu Qingfang can't even refute that. OG Qingfang probably *did* just want to help. But given that Shang Qinghua said that the OG 'could not be flapped' Mu Qingfang thinks the OG probably didn't dwell on Shen Qingqiu being pissed at him that much. He wraps his hands around his cup. "Well. It was the right thing to do," he says eventually, feeling like a fraud.

"The wax treatment has helped significantly," Shen Qingqiu says, looking away.

Exhaling deeply, Mu Qingfang says, "I'm really glad to hear that. Pain like that in your hands and knuckles…it's very difficult to get anything done with it."

"Mu Shidi sounds like he is speaking from experience," Shen Qingqiu observes, pouring them both more tea.

Nodding, Mu Qingfang says, "Yes, at one point I suffered a great deal of inflammation in the joints of my hands." Their eyes meet. "It wasn't from trauma. At the time-" He decides to stick to something like the truth. "I was affected by a poison that attacks those joints specifically. There was no treatment besides letting the poison run it's course. It happened before I could cultivate," he adds. "The wax treatments…mitigated the worst of the pain, so I could use my hands in a limited way."

Shen Qingqiu's gaze drops to Mu Qingfang's hands.

"They don't hurt anymore," Mu Qingfang says finally.

Glancing away, Shen Shixiong snorts. “Well. I wouldn’t wish this on anyone. It *is* improved with the breakthrough.”

Mu Qingfang breaks into a pleased smile. “Really? That’s *wonderful*.”

For a moment, Shen Qingqiu looks at him like he’s surprised. For just a moment, his face loses the pinched expression he carries a lot of the time, and Shen Qingqiu looks much younger. Younger and…a little confused.

“So what are you going to do with your *vacation*?” Shen Qingqiu asks with an elegantly arched eyebrow.

“My head disciple has graciously allowed me to garden with the youngest disciples if I feel the urge, but that’s about it,” Mu Qingfang says. To his surprise, the corner of Shen Qingqiu’s lip pulls up in a cute little smirk. “How is young Luo Binghe,” he asks, and sadly watches the smirk disappear.

“Catching up to the others.” Shen Qingqiu sighs. “He’s…troublesome.”

“Oh? In what way?” Mu Qingfang asks, curious. He remembers the source material well enough. But Shen Qingqiu…seems like he’s not really inclined to *personally* make the boy’s life hell.

“Sticky,” Shen Qingqiu says finally. “He likes loitering around with the girls instead of his shixiongs.”

“Huh,” Mu Qingfang says. “Well, he was getting beaten pretty badly that time I came across him. Perhaps he’s a bit wary of being around them.”

Frowning, Shen Qingqiu says slowly, “I confess, *that* had not occurred to me. I will allow him some leeway if that is the case.”

The conversation derails to a discussion about the paintings in Shen Qingqiu’s house. After Mu Qingfang asks, he learns that Shen Shixiong has indeed painted all of them. It’s a pleasant afternoon, and Mu Qingfang doesn’t want to push the limit of Shen Qingqiu’s hospitality.

Before he leaves, he says, “If you have time over the next few days I would be happy to give you a tour of the gardens on Qian Cao. My personal garden is quite extensive in addition to the large garden behind the Healing Pavilion.”

Both men stand up and slowly wander to the door. Shen Qingqiu says, “Rumors say that Mu Shidi has quite a collection of poisonous plants.”

Laughing a little, Mu Qingfang says, “Yes, Shixiong is correct.”

“I would be interested in seeing them,” Shen Qingqiu says, meeting his eyes.

That’s…That feels very *forward* for Shen Qingqiu! Practically a brazen declaration of friendship! “I would like that very much,” Mu Qingfang says honestly. “I will be in touch.”

“Good day,” Shen Qingqiu says. “And thank you for the wax. I look forward to testing it. I will see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Mu Qingfang says stupidly.

Which earns him an eyeroll. “*Yes*, Mu Shidi, for the Peak Lord meeting?” Shen Qingqiu drawls.

Chuckling a little, Mu Qingfang says, “Yes, of course. I will see you tomorrow. Thank you for the tea, and the company.”

He’s nearly out of earshot when he hears the soft words.

“You are welcome.”

Chapter End Notes

OG Qingfang is getting more interesting!!! He has a secret room?! WTF!!!

Mu Qing of course is a martial god from TGCF. What was I supposed to do, NOT mention him when his name is so close to Mu Qingfang?

Now that Wu Yanshin and Xie Yanmei have put their feet down, expect Mu Qingfang to start investigating his mysterious hidden room.

What do you think was in that letter?

Come tell me what you think!!

I will respect my teachers and discipline myself.

Chapter Summary

This chapter, while generally lighter in tone, does touch on the dub-con ness of sex pollen, and the ethics of the treatment. SQQ's childhood is mentioned and his injuries are described accurately but not like, in a lot of detail.

In particular, MQF/SY has a series of thoughts about his feelings on having to have sec solely to treat sex pollen. I mention this out of an abundance of caution, and feel free to comment if you would like more specific warnings, OR a chapter synopsis.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mu Qingfang spends the rest of the day wandering around Qian Cao peak. There's a very large medical library far back away from the main Healing Pavilion. The way there has a nicely manicured path with covered open air pavilions nearby. Small groups of disciples are enjoying them, and appear to be studying. Once they see him walking by, they call out greetings.

He goes over to talk to them. This group of disciples are wearing patches on the sleeve of their uniforms that mark them as juniors. "Are you all doing well today?" Mu Qingfang asks.

A boy in his early teens asks a few questions about treating freeze injuries and Mu Qingfang suspects this is some kind of homework assignment. Probably about the two kids he brought back the other day.

Mu Qingfang taps his chin. "I wonder, what should you do if you have a treatment question? What are your resources?"

Several of the boys groan and the girl looks smug. "I *told* you," one of the girls says, smugly. "I *told* you that Shizun would make us look it up." She meets Mu Qingfang's eyes.

Giving her a wink, Mu Qingfang smiles, "Ah, my disciples are so smart! While it may be tempting to ask a senior for the answer, you'll be much more likely to *retain* the information if you look it up yourself. Better still, if you make notes to review later."

"Thanking Shizun," the boys chorus together, sounding like a funeral dirge.

Mu Qingfang stifles his laughter, and continues his walk. He finds the library and loses several hours just reading. OG Qingfang has his own section of stuff that he'd authored. Much of it-huh- much of it was specifically about aphrodisiac poisoning. It makes sense, given that the man was a Master of dual cultivation.

OG Qingfang's theory was that the poison affected the victims qi so it was unable to be circulated, and the exchange of energy from sex was required to jumpstart the victims qi. Or else provide enough energy to overcome a blockage.

There was a whole entire dissertation on that topic. Interestingly, OG Qingfang *did* acknowledge that the person who was the, ah, penetrating partner, did not have to be *willing*, and hoo boy that makes Shen Yuan just feel *awful* reading it.

Did OG Qingfang's Shizun *force* him to treat these patients when he didn't want to? It kind of seems like it! Why *else* would Qingfang change that policy first thing after his ascension?

Ugh. That whole topic is just…ick. Mu Qingfang wrinkles his nose. He really, really hopes he won't get forced to do anything like that. Just thinking about it makes his stomach hurt.

Anyway! Mu Qingfang returns his reading materials to the proper shelves and abandons the library, wandering back to the Healing Garden and checking on the kids.

Sure enough there's a few young ones out there harvesting something. They have woven baskets with leafy looking greens dangling over the edges. They give him cheerful waves but appear to be busy and working hard so Mu Qingfang opts not to disturb them.

He feels a little frustrated with the restrictions Wu Yanshin and Xie Yanmei put on him. With some chagrin, Mu Qingfang thinks he's become a workaholic. What happened to the nerdy kid who goofed off all day?

Well. Shen Yuan supposes that he grew up when he got stuffed into this role like an ill fitting coat. He snorts. Turns out the coat fits well enough and now he's chilly when he takes it off.

For lack of anything better to do, he returns to his house. He grabs some night pearls and triggers the mysterious array in his room. Like before, he's transported to the other side with a flash. He sets up the night pearls so he can see.

Fuck, that's a lot of papers to go through, Mu Qingfang realizes. There's three large boxes filled. He crouches down on his haunches, randomly picking a box. He pulls out some papers, frowning as he examines them.

These are…old records.

These are *Yue Qingyuan's* and *Shen Qingqiu's* records from when they joined the sect. Mu Qingfang's eyebrows get higher and higher as he reads.

"My gods," he breathes, reading about exactly how Yue Qingyuan's nearly fatal qi deviation was treated after he pulled a sword for Wan Jian peak. The previous peak lords of Qian Cao, Qiong Ding, and Wan Jian were all required to keep young Yue Qi alive.

Treatment consisted of rebuilding his entire cultivation system using several methods cobbled together from various peaks.

His organs, tissues and bones were fortified using Bai Zhan techniques. These involved essentially breaking down every organ or whatever and rebuilding it with qi.

Contemporaneous letters showed that the prior Qian Cao peak lord strenuously advised against this course of action, but the sect leader had committed that Yue Qi was going to be his succeeding disciple and so would not be dissuaded.

They kept him in the Ling Xi caves for nearly eighteen months, and Yue Qi was half mad the entire time. The prior Qian Cao peak lord was only allowed to check on him once a month. And yet, Mu Qingfang reads, Yue Qi came dangerously close to bleeding out on several different occasions.

He can't read any more of this, it's too fucked up. Mu Qingfang stretches his back, and pulls the second box close to him.

Ah, he discovers. This one is Shen Qingqiu's, formerly known as Shen Jiu. Mu Qingfang eyes the box without removing any papers. Should he even be reading this? He bites his lip for a while, thinking.

Clearly, OG Qingfang thought whatever was in Shen Qingqiu's records was better off being inaccessible. Yet he didn't destroy them, suggesting they might someday be needed.

Mu Qingfang thinks of the way Shen Qingqiu's lips quirked up yesterday in that cute little smirk, and he unconsciously smiles. That expression…he wouldn't mind seeing it again.

Okay, he decides at last. For right now, he's Mu Qingfang, so he probably should know what's in here. He steels himself, and starts reading.

Shen Jiu was admitted into the sect on the recommendation of Yue Qi. Shen Jiu's meridians showed signs of demonic cultivation. He had severe damage to his entire cultivation system and was marked unlikely to ever cultivate a golden core.

He had extensive injuries, badly healed. His hands and feet showed similar damage. He had extensive scarring on his back, and what was a suspected slave brand.

He had evidence of extensive and ongoing malnutrition.

He had anger issues, trust issues and authority issues. He couldn't hold food down and barely slept.

Shen Jiu was unable to make friends, or even any allies.

He kept to himself and refused to come to Qian Cao unless he was forced.

Eventually, Xie Yanmei personally sought him out on Qing Jing peak and somehow convinced him to allow her to do a limited examination. She performed the first exam *in the woodshed* only after Shen Jiu extracted a promise from her to never share a word of this to anyone.

He did allow her to keep records provided they were kept securely, in a separate place from everyone else's. *And*, he demanded that Yue Qi's records *also* be kept away from everyone else's.

It took *years* but Xie Yanmei was able to heal almost all of the scarring on Shen Qingqiu's back. She was able to regrow several small bones in his hands and feet, allowing him to have nearly full function, though he would always have pain.

She prescribed him nutrient drinks which he refused to drink, so she started making them absurdly sweet. Only *then* would he consume them.

Shen Shixiong was a very misunderstood man Xie Yanmei had said.

Once OG Qingfang was made the head disciple of Qian Cao, the Qing Jing peak lord told Shen Qingqiu that he had to allow Qingfang to treat him. Shen Qingqiu, of course, already *had* a healer he tolerated (it's unclear if he actually *liked* Yanmei) and so of course he refused. This caused some friction as OG Qingfang at that point only knew that Shen Shixiong refused to allow him to perform any kind of exam.

Qingfang wrote in his personal notes that he was fine with Yanmei remaining Shen Shixiong's personal healer, but somehow word got around that Shen Shixiong refused to see Mu Qingfang and it turned into a big thing.

It's easy for Shen Yuan to imagine, actually. He can just hear people say, 'Oh, Shen Qingqiu thinks he's so much better than everyone else, that he won't even see the next peak lord!'

He hates men, Shang Qinghua had said, *except he hates them in the way that means he's really afraid of them*.

Anyway, suffice to say that OG Qingfang *never* had any personal issue with Shen Qingqiu, and had the man allowed Qingfang to *talk* to him about it, he would have told him that.

Once they were all peak lords, Shen Qingqiu stopped coming to Qian Cao altogether. He deviated fairly frequently, and when someone found him, they would drag him here. And as soon as he recovered enough to walk, he'd escape.

OG Qingfang tried to have Yanmei take back over as Shen Qingqiu's personal healer. But Shen Qingqiu took that as a *personal* slight. Shen Yuan rubs a hand over his face. *What, the Qian Cao Peak Lord is too good to see me anymore?* and so Shen Qingqiu declined to let Yanmei or anyone else take care of his health.

Mu Qingfang lets the papers fall to the floor, forgotten.

Shen Qingqiu refused to let any healers see to him, until that is, Shen Yuan transmigrated.

Mu Qingfang checks the dates again. Yes. Holy crap, he thinks. What a *shitshow*. Fuck. He has no idea how much time has passed but he should probably get ready for the peak lord meeting.

He puts the papers back where they should be, and restacks the boxes. Before he uses the array, he glances back at the small shrine. He reaches into his sleeves, and produces some incense. He lights it with a spark of qi, and places it into the incense holder.

“Xuan Zhen. This Mu Qingfang asks that you watch over the people of Cang Qiong mountain sect.”

Mu Qingfang gives the altar one last look, and leaves via the array.

The peak lord crown is heavy as fuck and Mu Qingfang hates wearing it. When he goes to clinics he almost always wears a much smaller and much simpler one. While he’s finishing up getting his hair done, someone knocks at his door.

“Shizun,” Wu Yanshin calls, and then walks in.

Mu Qingfang grins. Why bother knocking then? “I’ll be out in a moment, Yanshin,” he calls.

She’s already made tea by the time he emerges from his bedroom. Wu Yanshin looks up from where she’s pouring tea into cups at the table. “You look very nice, Shizun.”

“Thanks,” he says. “Have I always hated this crown?”

Snorting a little, Wu Yanshin says, “You have. I’m surprised you even still have it, let alone actually wear it.”

“Well the peak lord meeting-”

She waves a hand. “Yeah, about that. Shang Shibo’s head disciple sent a message to me asking if you would address the sex pollen thing.”

Mu Qingfang blinks. “The what?”

“Shizun, you know. The *thing* that you made everyone fill out a while back. In case someone gets poisoned? You know. Who their first choice is, to ah. Treat them.”

Because of course, here in a stallion novel, that’s a thing that should be done ahead of time. “Is there a main list somewhere?”

Smiling brightly, Wu Yanshin hands him a scroll. “I had a feeling you were going to say that.”

“You know me too well,” Mu Qingfang says absently, unrolling the scroll and reading down the list. It’s a list of all the current peak lords and their head disciples and next to each name is another name.

“You’re the only one who needs to write down who you want to treat you, in case of emergency,” Yanshin adds helpfully.

“I …see that,” Mu Qingfang says disantly. “Wait a second…” He looks over the list again. “Why is *my* name down here so many times!” He doesn’t want to have to fuck Xiao

Qingshen or Wei Qingwei! And he certainly doesn't want to sleep with any one *else*.

There's also a blank spot next to Shen Qingqiu's name. Well, that's fine, Mu Qingfang thinks. He would probably want Yue Qingyuan anyway. For some reason, the thought of Shen Qingqiu sleeping with the sect leader makes him feel vaguely uneasy.

"Well, you *are* a master of dual cultivation," Wu Yanshin teases. Her smile fades as she realizes that something's wrong. "Hey," she says gently. "You know you don't actually have to- you made the rule that you can refuse-"

"And how am I, the fucking *Peak Lord* supposed to *refuse* if it has to happen to save someone's life." Mu Qingfang doesn't shout, but it's close. Clearly Shen Yuan can be flapped.

"Listen to me." Wu Yanshin says, enunciating each word. "You are not the only person on this peak that can treat aphrodisiac poisoning and everyone knows that. That list-" she points to the offending scroll, discarded on the table, "Is not consent. That list is an *inquiry*. It's a *question*, Renshu. A request. You-or anyone else, for that matter, still has to consent." She meets his eyes. "*You* taught us that."

She leans back in her chair. "There's any number of people who would be happy to treat Wei Shixiong, or Yue Zhangmen. In theory, everybody is supposed to *ask* the person they write down to make sure they're okay being listed." She pulls the scroll back to her side of the table and opens it. "This is from two years ago. So just tell them that you're no longer treating aphrodisiac poisoning and to pick someone else."

Mu Qingfang looks away. She doesn't ask what made him change his mind. She just accepts it. For a moment, Shen Yuan misses his sister deeply. When he glances back at Yanshin, she's just giving him a terribly compassionate expression. "I will consider your words," Mu Qingfang says eventually.

"Do you need me to attend with you, Shizun?" Wu Yanshin asks, after a moment.

"I don't think so," Mu Qingfang says slowly. Then he smiles. "You already told me what to do."

"Shizun!" Yanshin exclaims. "I didn't mean it like that!"

Soon enough, it's time to leave and Mu Qingfang flies over to Qiong Ding peak. He's been to at least four of these peak lord meetings since his transmigration. He arrives right on time so most of the other peak lords have already arrived. He looks around but doesn't see Shang Qinghua.

There's an empty seat between Shen Qingqiu and Qi Qingqi. Not surprising, Mu Qingfang thinks, since those two pretty much *hate* each other.

"Mu Shidi," Zhangmen Shixiong says from *right* next to him, and Mu Qingfang jumps, bringing a hand up to his chest as if to calm his racing heart.

“Zhangmen Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang greets. “It’s good to see you.” The sect leader looks *good*. Better than usual. His dark eyes are sparkling.

“Apologies for startling you, Shidi must have been deep in thought.” Yue Qingyuan says. “If you’re available after the meeting, would you join me for tea?”

“Certainly,” Mu Qingfang says, inwardly wincing. Well, perhaps it won’t be so bad. He wouldn’t be surprised if Yue Shixiong gave him a lecture about decorum or whatever, given that the last time they spoke, Mu Qingfang told him to shit or get off the pot.

Though it worked out fine for the sect leader, so honestly, he shouldn’t be complaining.

“Sit *down*, Mu Shidi,” Shen Qingqiu says. “The sooner we get started, the sooner we can get finished.”

Spoken like a true millennial! The only thing more true than that is if Shen Shixiong happened to say this meeting should have been an email. Mu Qingfang sits down in the chair next to him, just as Shang Qinghua rushes into the meeting hall, barely holding on to a bunch of scrolls.

“Sorry, sorry,” he cries, slipping past Wei Qingwei and sitting down between him and Liu Qingge.

“Ah, it looks like everyone’s here,” Yue Qingyuan says from his place at the head of the table. “Shall we get started?”

While the sect leader starts talking (and before the shouting begins) Mu Qingfang watches idly as Shen Qingqiu snags the teapot and pours himself some tea. He turns half to Mu Qingfang and arches an eyebrow.

Mu Qingfang helpfully pushes his cup over to Shen Shixiong’s side of the table, and the other man fills it obligingly for him. Glancing up, he notices Liu Qingge glaring at him from across the table.

What, dude? *Just because you hate Shen Qingqiu doesn’t mean I have to* Mu Qingfang thinks in annoyance. He starts bouncing his leg under the table aggressively.

He’s staring mindlessly at Zhangmen Shixiong when something clamps on to his thigh. Somehow, Mu Qingfang manages to not jump in his chair. He glances down and that’s.

A pale hand, with long fingers, pinching threateningly. Shen Qingqiu is squeezing his thigh!!! Shen Shixiong gives a stronger, warning squeeze and shoots him a brief sideways death glare.

Mu Qingfang stops bouncing his leg and very slowly, Shen Qingqiu draws his hand back into his lap. Mu Qingfang discretely covers his mouth with his hand so the rest of his martial siblings don’t see him grinning like an idiot. Next to him, Shen Qingqiu has his fan displayed and held in front of his mouth, hiding *his* smirk from everyone who isn’t Mu Qingfang.

The meeting progresses and Mu Qingfang has nearly forgotten he has something for the agenda. Unfortunately, Shang Qinghua clears his throat and says, "Mu Shidi has something to

discuss."

God dammit, Airplane, you HACK.

“Thank you Shang Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang says smoothly, while his eyes promise a painful death to the An Ding peak lord. “Shang Shixong helpfully pointed out to me that certain forms need to be updated for Qian Cao’s records. Specifically, we need each peak lord and head disciple to have a proxy selected in…in the event of aphrodisiac poisoning.”

Laughs and murmurs erupt down the table.

Doggedly, Mu Qingfang continues. “Also, as a general notification, I am no longer providing dual cultivation services, so please do not use me as a proxy. My peak has many qualified members that are willing-”

Interrupting, Liu Qingge says, “Why can’t it be you?”

Really? REALLY? Shen Yuan glares through Mu Qingfang’s eyes. “This master had no idea he was held in such high esteem,” he says. “I appreciate the thought, but the fact remains, I do not wish to provide such services any more. My reasons are my own.” He says in a tone of finality.

Then he remembers an important point. “One other thing,” Mu Qingfang says, “You must have *consent* from the person whose name you write down. Without consent, the act is *rape* and that will not be tolerated.”

Liu Qingge’s pretty lips part. “But-”

“As expected from such a brute,” Shen Qingqiu breaks in smoothly, and Mu Qingfang thinks *Oh, no.* “Liu Shidi should remember that he always has the *choice* not to rush in headlong, and actually do some research or heavens forbid *ask for help*-”

“Oh, like I’d trust anything *you* have to say-” Liu Qingge glares across the table.

“ENOUGH,” Zhangmen Shixiong says icily. He does not raise his voice in the least, but flexes his qi, and it ripples repressively through the room. “Liu Shidi can trust information he gets from Shen Shidi. It is unbecoming for peak lords to act like children.” Yue Shixiong waits until the murmurs subside and then says in a blessedly normal voice, “Mu Shidi, did you have anything else to add?”

Rubbing his head, Mu Qingfang says, “I suggest everyone make their decision with all haste, lest you be poisoned and have no choice about the matter.” Mu Qingfang had to think long and hard about the issue. He definitely doesn’t want to have sex solely to save his life, but… he can’t in good conscience allow himself to *die* if one sexual act can save him.

He’ll just. Have to deal with it. Somehow. Even if the thought of having sex *like that*, because he *has to* is sickening. Mu Qingfang pushes that upsetting thought right out of his head. Repress, repress, repress! He starts bouncing his leg again, trying to keep his agitation from showing on his face.

Next to him, Shen Qingqiu exhales forcefully.

Yue Qingyuan starts talking about, this time asking about how this year's crop of grapes is looking and also how is the winemaking coming along? The Zui Xian peak lord grasps on to the conversational lifeline and begins talking about the current grape varietals.

Mu Qingfang happens to glance a little to his left and catches Shen Qingqiu's eyes. Shen Shixiong gives him a significant look and Mu Qingfang merely smiles politely, not having a clue.

Shen Qingqiu leans back in his chair and adjusts his outer robes. And then pinches the *shit* out of Mu Qingfang's thigh. "Stop. Bouncing." He hisses quietly.

"Sorry, I can't help it," Mu Qingfang says, leaning over to whisper at Shen Shixiong.

Narrowing his eyes, Shen Qingqiu sits up straight.

Oh, no. Mu Qingfang has a bad feeling about this.

"Zhangmen Shixiong," Shen Qingqiu says sweetly, laying his closed fan on the table, "Perhaps we should finish up now, and let the others go? I know you wanted to speak with Mu Shidi rather *urgently*."

Oh, this *asshole*, Shen Yuan thinks, amused at his Shixiong's maneuvering.

Hao Qingshui, the Xui Xian peak lord, trails off in confusion. He clears his throat. "Anyway, feel free to drop in any time."

"Lovely," Yue Qingyuan says, smiling benignly. "Let us end the meeting here, and I will see you all next month. Shen Shidi, Mu Shidi, please join me for a quick cup of tea."

"I can't believe you did that," Mu Qingfang says, trying not to laugh, while Shen Qingqiu smirks.

"Next time Mu Shidi should listen to his Shixiong," Shen Qingqiu tells him rather smugly. "Come along, Shidi. Mustn't keep Yue Shixiong waiting."

Chapter End Notes

I really am so happy that you guys are enjoying this story so much! I just really wanted to say thanks for all the support! It has elevated my mood so much!!

SQQ: ISTG stop bouncing your leg, my teacup is shaking

MQF: *shenyuanexe has stopped working*

MQF *hand on my leg*

SQQ: YOU'RE DOING IT AGAIN

MQF: MERCY

Across the table, LQG, QQQ and SQH are just STARING at the shenanigans. ARe they supposed to pretend they don't see it? Okay!

I will strive diligently for the perfection of technology

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: vague acephobia on SY/MQF's part

Snickering, Mu Qingfang drinks his tea and listens to his shixiongs bicker. He’s coming to realize that Shen Qingqiu is a lot funnier than he’s ever expected.

“Anyway,” Shen Qingqiu says to Mu Qingfang, “Since Yue Shixiong won’t just come out and say it, he’s trying to ask if there’s anything he can do for you.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They meet at Yue Qingyuan’s residence. To Mu Qingfang’s surprise, Shen Qingqiu is the one who strolls right into the kitchen and prepares the tea. Yue Qingyuan gives Mu Qingfang a wry glance, when he notices him noticing.

“Shen Shidi is convinced his tea is better,” Yue Qingyuan tells Mu Qingfang sheepishly, kneeling down at the table.

Settling on his knees across from the sect leader, Mu Qingfang steals a glance to the right. Shen Shixiong has focused his attention on the teapot, but looks over at the table.

“Mu Shidi, do not, under any circumstances, allow the sect leader to brew you tea.” Shen Qingqiu remarks.

Yue Qingyuan does not take offense to this statement. Instead he looks pleased, the weirdo.

“Shen Shixiong’s tea is very good,” Mu Qingfang says.

Zhangmen Shixiong pounces, “Oh, have you had the opportunity to partake already?” Yue Qingyuan smiles.

“Don’t fish for information, Qi-ge, it’s unbecoming.” Shen Qingqiu says, bringing the tea service to the table. Yue Qingyuan reaches out to pour, and Shen Qingqiu slaps his hand with his fan. Mu Qingfang snickers. Shen Qingqiu pours, handing a cup to Yue Qingyuan and then Mu Qingfang.

Mu Qingfang keeps waiting for one of his shixiongs to tell him what he’s doing here. Is this a joint therapy session? Or something else? Please clue this shidi in!

“Mu Shidi has been very busy since the last time I saw him,” Yue Qingyuan says, after he has taken a sip of tea.

“Yes,” Mu Qingfang says. “Zhangmen Shixiong, I should apologize for the way we parted during our session-” He stops as Yue Qingyuan holds up a hand.

“Ah, Shidi, I didn’t ask you here for that. I wanted to *thank* you for your intervention.” Yue Qingyuan looks way too earnest. “Without your analysis, I would not have been able to reconcile with Shen Shidi.”

Shen Qingqiu rolls his eyes. “Because why would you bother *explaining* when you could give me useless apologies instead,” he says acidly. His tone is sharp, but holds nothing of the poison that it used to. His dark green eyes meet Mu Qingfangs. “In this *isolated* case, the sect leader is correct. Thanking Mu Shidi.”

Biting his lip a little, Mu Qingfang says, “I just…anyone would have-”

“We have already established that anyone *wouldn’t* Shidi, do keep up.” Shen Qingqiu’s voice is mild.

“I am glad for the two of you,” Mu Qingfang says.

Shen Qingqiu leans forward. “And that reminds me. “Qi-ge, Mu Shidi thought that when you confessed to me, that it was a *love confession*.” He smiles a little meanly.

Covering his eyes, Mu Qingfang sighs.

Yue Qingyuan laughs. “Really? I’m afraid not. I raised Shen Shidi from when he was an infant.” His eyes are warm when he looks at Shen Qingqiu. “Perhaps I should start calling him Shen-didi.”

“Try it,” Shen Qingqiu suggests, eyes narrowing. “If you want to die today.”

Snickering, Mu Qingfang drinks his tea and listens to his shixiongs bicker. He’s coming to realize that Shen Qingqiu is a lot funnier than he’s ever expected.

“Anyway,” Shen Qingqiu says to Mu Qingfang, “Since Yue Shixiong won’t just come out and say it, he’s trying to ask if there’s anything he can do for you.”

Frowning, Mu Qingfang says, “I’m good, thanks.”

Yue Qingyuan and Shen Qingqiu exchange glances.

“What?” Mu Qingfang protests. “I’m *fine*.”

“Indeed,” Shen Qingqiu drawls. “You’re so ‘fine’ that your head disciple had to force you to take time off before you collapsed from exhaustion.” He taps his index finger to his lips. “I

seem to recall a saying about that, what was it…? Ah." He leans forward, going in for the kill "Physician, heal yourself."

Okay, there is NO WAY that Shen Qingqiu should know a bastardized Shakespeare quote! Airplane, you HACK!

"Thanking Shixiong for worrying about this useless Shidi," Mu Qingfang says through clenched teeth.

But Shen Qingqiu just laughs. Like, throws his head back and laughs. He's…Mu Qingfang takes a deep breath and tries to cope with the fact that *Shen Qingqiu has dimples*. That when Shen Qingqiu is *happy*, it makes his face *glow*.

His stomach churns and he forces his eyes elsewhere lest they linger too long, and he accidentally meets Yue Qingyuan's all too knowing gaze. Mu Qingfang swallows and says "Ah…I should probably leave first, there's…I have to-"

"Trying to escape already?" Shen Qingqiu asks, a hint of a smile still lingering in the corners of his lips. He waves a hand in the air. "Fine, go ahead. But Shidi, I am *serious*. I am a man who pays his debts."

Mu Qingfang stands. "How can there be debts when no payment was ever needed?" He smiles slyly, bowing at each of his Shixiongs. "Thank you for the tea, it was indeed delicious."

On the flight back to Qian Cao peak Mu Qingfang wonders if he might be getting ill. His stomach was acting up for no reason at all. He doesn't think he's eaten anything bad. Actually, now that he considers the issue, he's not sure when the last time he ate anything was.

That must be it. He'll just grab something from the dining hall. Of course, to get to the dining hall he has to pass by the Healing pavilion. He might as well just take a quick walk through right? Once he lands, he surreptitiously looks around, checking to see if Wu Yanshin or Xie Yanmei are peeking around corners.

Mu Qingfang thinks he's in the clear, so he boldly ascends the few steps and enters. It's quiet he thinks, and no sooner does *that cursed word* enter his brain than a patient starts screaming. He takes off running down the hall, following the loud cries.

He finds chaos in an exam room. A male disciple (Mu Qingfang feels the qi humming under the man's skin) from an unknown peak is being held down by two Qian Cao healers. Just by looking, Mu Qingfang thinks this is likely a delayed poisoning.

"Do you two need help?" He calls.

"Shizun," the female healer says, "This patient just presented after a night hunt, we were trying to do his intake questions and he just became aggressive and agitated and started trying

to punch us in the face."

The patient arches up off the bed and the two healers struggle to keep him down.

Mu Qingfang doesn't have needles in his sleeves right now. *Rookie error, Shen Yuan*, he tells himself. He holds up a hand and forms tiny needles out of his qi and sends them flying. In seconds the patient is rendered unconscious and the two medics are wiping sweat from their faces. "Where is everyone else?" He asks, looking around. Aren't there supposed to be a bunch of support staff around?

"Shizun, didn't you hear? A bunch of mixed peak disciples came back with aphrodisiac poisoning. Most of the healers are dealing with them next door." She glances back at the patient like she's afraid he's going to jump scare her.

"You'd better get some real acupuncture needles," Mu Qingfang says after a moment. "The ones I fashioned out of qi won't last very long."

"Yes, Shizun," the second healer says, holding up several. "I think we have it from here." He adds, "I can call Xie-Shijie if you need-"

"No thank you," Mu Qingfang demurs. He doesn't want to get in trouble!

"Shizun, *what* are you doing?" Xie Yanmei demands from the doorway. "Li Xiaoling, how long has Peak Lord Mu been here?"

"Um." Li Xiaoling steals a glance at Mu Qingfang. "Not long, just a few minutes, Shijie."

Eyes narrowed, Xie Yanmei says, "Out, Shizun. And be glad it's just me and that Yanshin-da-jie is next door."

Grimacing, Mu Qingfang decides a tactical retreat is indicated here. "Well, I was happy to help-"

"Have a good night Shizun," Yanmei says firmly, and *watches* until he's out the door.

So much SASS from his disciples! OG Qingfang, why are they like this? Mu Qingfang is not *pouting*, he thinks. He's not even stomping his feet on the way back to his house. Anyway, once back home, he's again faced with the fact that apparently he has no life and has no idea what to do to entertain himself now that he's not exhausted.

Maybe he should have stayed longer and hung out with Yue Qingyuan and Shen Qingqiu. Mu Qingfang makes the mistake of flopping on his bed and immediately sits up to remove his hair crown. Oof, this thing is terrible. Why is it so pointy? Mu Qingfang wonders. He sets it on his bedside table with a *thunk* and then flops back down.

At least the peak lord meeting didn't go to badly, he thinks, although he was pretty surprised to be listed as so many people's emergency fuck. That reminds him, he really needs to pick a name for his own emergency.

He spares a few minutes trying to imagine sleeping with his fellow peak lords. Liu Qingge is handsome enough, but…ugh, no. Shang Qinghua? Also, no.

Yue Qingyuan is a good looking man Mu Qingfang thinks objectively, and then wants to vomit when he imagines being touched by him.

Wei Qingwei is tall and broad, bulging with muscles. Again, this is a handsome man that Mu Qingfang just doesn't want to sleep with.

Mu Qingfang stares up at the ceiling for awhile. Qi Qingqi? His nose wrinkles. *Immediately* no.

He dismisses the idea of any of the lower peak lords. And that leaves…

Pulling a pillow over his face, Mu Qingfang screams into it a few times. He rolls onto his side and clutches it to his chest. *That leaves Shen Qingqiu*, his mind whispers.

Okay. Okay. On the one hand, Shen Shixiong is definitely handsome. Gorgeous really, especially if he can be convinced into smiling. And he's *funny*. Mu Qingfang, in spite of his own embarrassment at thinking about his ~~friend~~ Shixiong like this, just…*likes* him.

Mu Qingfang thinks of bouncing his leg so hard it made Shen Qingqiu physically restrain him. His stomach does a funny little jump, and he wonders again if he might be getting sick.

Mostly he's just really glad that Shen Shixiong is feeling so much better. Well enough to tease and bicker with the sect leader. And honestly, it was so much better that Yue Qingyuan found enough balls to stop Liu Qingge from constantly sniping at Shen Shixiong. Mu Qingfang definitely doesn't miss the shouting matches.

"Oh, shit," Mu Qingfang says, and sits bolt upright. He forgot that he invited Shen Qingqiu to tour his personal garden! The one with the demonic plants and all the poisons. That is a problem for future Mu Qingfang. However *current* Mu Qingfang needs to get his shit together.

He changes out of his fancy peak lord robes and decides he's just going to get ready for bed. Just like the old days, he thinks. If all else fails, try to sleep! Before he does though, he enters the hidden room. He lights some incense and kneels at the little shrine.

"Xuan Zhen," he sighs. "Am I supposed to know what I'm doing? No? Okay, good." He absorbs the silence for a few moments. "I think there's something wrong with me," he says quietly. "I didn't realize in my life before. I mostly didn't think about it at all. But *here*...it's a big deal and I need to be able to list someone that I want to have sex with. You know. In case of emergency."

The incense smoke curls gently in upwardly moving spirals. It's a little hypnotizing. "How come it's so *easy* for everyone else?" he grips out loud. "How come *I'm* the only one that feels like this?"

Mu Qingfang leans back. His eyes are actually getting a bit heavy, he thinks calmly. Then he flops over, awareness fading.

"There's nothing wrong with you," someone says aggressively.

Shen Yuan opens his eyes. He glances around. The walls are plastered with large posters of Luo Binghe. In one, he's holding onto a busty woman with one hand and Xin Mo in the other. In others, he's sitting on a gilt throne, sword at his hand and beauties at his feet.

He's in *his* bed, in his bedroom from his other life.

Distantly, he brings a hand up and pushes his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose. Was someone just talking to him? Shen Yuan shakes his head. He stands up. His hands…he examines them closely.

They look normal, and he means like normal hands period, not like what his hands normally used to look like. These hands are missing the misshapen knuckles and fingers pointing the wrong direction.

"Do you always think this much?" someone says, and sighs heavily, aggrieved.

Shen Yuan wanders around to the front of his dresser and meets his own eyes in the mirror. His reflection makes a sour face.

"Thanks for finally noticing me," his reflection says, with an eye roll. "I wish you'd notice I don't like musky incense. Jasmine is much nicer. So, like I was saying, there's *nothing* wrong with you."

Shen Yuan blinks. His reflection doesn't. "Okay," he says stupidly. "Who are you?"

His reflection looks up and exhales heavily before meeting Shen Yuan's eyes again. "You called me and you don't even know my name? Unbelievable." He crosses his arms over his chest.

Listen, buddy, Shen Yuan barely remembers what he was doing before he popped back into his room. His forehead creases. Wait. Mu Qingfang?

"Getting warmer," the man in the mirror says. "I used to be called Mu Qing. But my worshippers know me as Xuan Zhen." Definitely, he stares Shen Yuan down. "Now. Couple things. Sorry about the -what do you keep calling it? Transmigration. Yeah, that was me."

"Um…why?" Shen Yuan says.

Mu Qing rolls his eyes. "Short story is I got cursed into being a baby and tossed down to earth. The curse came with a memory wipe, and when I finally cultivated enough to break the

curse, my memory returned and I ascended again. But…" He presses his thin lips together. "That would have left my new sect without their best healer."

Before Shen Yuan can say anything, Mu Qing says, "So I pulled the best qualified person who was recently dead and resurrected them to take the job." He narrows his eyes. "What? I gave you all the medical knowledge you'd ever need! You're *welcome* by the way."

All Shen Yuan can say is, "But I'm not a doctor."

That gets a smile out of Mu Qing. "Well, you are now. And you're doing pretty good at it! I think I chose pretty well considering. Now. Any other questions?"

"You said there's nothing wrong with me," Shen Yuan starts, "Then how come-?"

"Oh, that," Mu Qing says. "That's a normal variation, don't worry about it. Besides, some people-and I think you're one of them- just need to feel good and comfortable with someone before you want-" He waves a hand. "Any of that." Now he glares. "So stop thinking that you're a freak or whatever. It's just how you're made, and that's okay."

In the mirror, Mu Qing turns his head like there's someone calling him. "Well, I have to go. See you around, Shen Yuan." He grins all of the sudden and the air around him lightens. "Or should I say, Qingfang?"

Mu Qingfang wakes the next morning in his bed, feeling rather strange. He doesn't…actually remember going to bed last night. He scrunches up his face in thought. He remembers a vague dream about his old bedroom and that's it. With some extra effort he gets an amorphous image of his own (former) face in the mirror. Weird, he thinks, and moves on with his day.

As he gets dressed he makes a mental note to get some different incense for the small shrine. He's not sure why, but he feels like Xuan Zhen would like something a little more floral. Perhaps jasmine? He'll have to buy some.

He fixes some tea and thinks. The In Case Of Emergency Fuck declaration is still bothering him. Maybe the problem is that when he was trying to imagine sex with someone, he was imagining himself on top?

It's just a thought exercise, Mu Qingfang decides, and then jinxes himself by following up that thought with, *what could it possibly hurt*?

Okay! He's ready! He's picturing the boy band war god! Liu Qingge, pressing him down into the bed-NOPE! No can do.

Mu Qingfang sighs. He closes his eyes and rubs his forehead.

Next he tries Wei Qingwei and shudders. *This is horrifying* Mu Qingfang thinks. *I really can't do this*.

One thing is clear- Mu Qingfang definitely needs to avoid sex pollen like the plague. But he should maybe think about some kind of advance directive. *In the event Mu Qingfang is struck down by aphrodisiac poisoning, please treat with sedatives until dead*.

Somehow he thinks that Wu Yanshin won't take that very well.

For shits and giggles he imagines Shen Qingqiu leaning up against him slowly, giving him an even gaze. Perhaps after they had tea together. Maybe Mu Qingfang helped him with the wax treatments for his hands. Afterwards, maybe Shen Qingqiu would crowd him closer against a wall. Maybe he slowly squeezes Shen Yuan's arm, and slides his hand down, threading their fingers together. Maybe Shen Qingqiu leans down just a little and-

Warmth flushes through Mu Qingfang's body. His cheeks feel hot to the touch. Seriously! He's got to be getting sick! This keeps happening for no reason! He takes his pulse. Elevated! See? Proof!

He lights a talisman and shortly after Wu Yanshin knocks on his door. "Shizun?"

"Come in," Mu Qingfang calls.

Wu Yanshin enters, looking a little alarmed. The tension in her face eases when she sees him just sitting at the table. "Shizun, what do you need?"

"Yanshin, do you mind running a scan? I think I'm coming down with something." Mu Qingfang holds out a wrist. Her fingertips feel cool against his skin.

She frowns. "Shizun…your pulse is a little faster than usual but, I don't sense anything wrong with you. What symptoms are you having?"

Mu Qingfang thinks for a moment, brows drawing together. "It-it comes and goes. I get nauseous for a few seconds and then it goes away. Brief palpitations that just stop. Just now I got a *hot flash*.

"Were you doing anything in particular when these symptoms occurred?" Wu Yanshin crosses her arms over her chest.

Was he? "I suppose…oh. I was considering the proxy forms." Mu Qingfang looks down at his lap, where he's unconsciously clasped his hands together.

"I see." Wu Yanshin says. Delicately, she adds, "Shizun…some people would probably feel anxious about having to make a decision like this."

"I imagine so," Mu Qingfang agrees, wondering what in the world that has to do with him?

Their eyes meet. Wu Yanshin says slowly, "Some people find it helpful to just…go ahead and do the thing they've been dreading, and just get it over with."

“You’re not suggesting I should just go sleep with someone?” Mu Qingfang says, appalled.

She closes her eyes for several seconds. “Forgiveness, Shizun. I spoke imprecisely. I merely meant the act of putting a name down. You can always change it later if you want. But at least the task would be complete. Some people could then consider alternatives at leisure.”

“Yanshin, why are you talking to me like I’m a patient?” Mu Qingfang says irritably.

She stares at the table. “Was I doing that? This disciple was wrong.” She reaches into her sleeve and produces a form. “I will leave this with you to consider. Shizun…” Wu Yanshin looks troubled. “Please let me know if I can help you with anything.”

“Thank you,” Mu Qingfang says, a strained smile on his lips. Once he’s alone again, he pulls the paper closer and reads it through. Perhaps she’s right. Maybe he should just-write in a name. He can always change his mind!

Mechanically he grinds some ink.When it’s ready, he loads his brush and inks three characters without thinking about it too much. He dries the ink with qi, and then folds the form in half. He leaves it on the table to be dealt with later.

Since he already has ink ready, he might as well write to Shen Shixiong and see if he would like to see the gardens later.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't write as much at work today, so getting this one written was a little more of a struggle. I'm really happy with how it came out, especially the dream sequence in the middle. :)

I have been enjoying your comments so much!! Thank you so much for your support!

Come talk to me in the comment section!

And for all-round development of myself.

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: Shen Yuan's mental gymnastics.

Mu Qingfang tries not to think too much about why this visit is making him feel like he's about to have a heart attack. He keeps having palpitations and tachycardia with some vague nausea in between. The only thing that keeps it at bay is keeping himself *extremely* busy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mu Qingfang sends over a message to Zui Xian, requesting some water chestnut cakes if they have time to make some. Within an hour, he gets a response from his two martial nephews that they will bring some over when they're ready.

Shen Qingqiu is visiting this afternoon and Mu Qingfang wants everything to be perfect. He's already tidied up and made sure he has good tea leaves. He's taken a quick walk through the garden and trimmed some of the overgrown plants. He doesn't want Shen Shixiong to get dirty, after all.

Mu Qingfang tries not to think too much about why this visit is making him feel like he's about to have a heart attack. He keeps having palpitations and tachycardia with some vague nausea in between. The only thing that keeps it at bay is keeping himself *extremely* busy.

It would be a lot easier if Wu Yanshin didn't have him on such a short leash! Of course, Mu Qingfang *is* the Peak Lord, and he certainly *could* override her bossy decision to force him to rest. But…then she'd be unhappy with him. Easier to go along with it.

Once he's finished doing a quick weeding in his personal garden, Mu Qingfang wanders over to the main garden behind the Healing Pavilion.

There's four young disciples weeding- well. They're supposed to be weeding. What they're *actually* doing is chucking clods of dirt at each other.

"Hello," Mu Qingfang calls, and everyone freezes in horror. "You children look busy this morning. Would you like any help from this old man?" He suppresses his smile at their appalled expressions.

"Begging Shizun's pardon," one of the boys says. "We were just-aerating the dirt!"

“I see,” Mu Qingfang says, amused. “Good aeration is important.” He wanders down the row of lavender. “Did you know that being exposed to dirt is good for the immune system? It’s supposed to prevent conditions like asthma.”

The kids exchange glances, as if to say ‘what is Shizun going on about now’? One of the braver ones says, “That’s…that’s really interesting, Shizun.”

Finally, Mu Qingfang gives up pretending this isn’t hilarious. He laughs. “You children look terrified. Is this old man so scary then?” Thankfully they answer with a chorus of “No Shizun!”

“Try to keep the dirt out of your hair.” He says, and wanders off. Clearly they’re having a good time without him looming over them.

He retreats to his home and paces back and forth for like fifteen minutes before he slumps into a chair at the table, resting his head in his hands. “This is not a date,” Mu Qingfang says. “Why are you being like this? This is just a-a friendly visit. Just…” He takes a deep breath. “Just calm the fuck down.”

He decides to meditate but finds it difficult to quiet his mind. Back in his first life, he recalls reading that some people don’t think in stream of consciousness, but rather in pictures and images only. Shen Yuan definitely can’t relate. He almost always has a constant inner monologue going. And in this case it’s pretty annoying actually!

Shen Qingqiu (thankfully) takes pity on his mental state and shows up a little early. Mu Qingfang is profoundly grateful for this, at least now he can stop the anticipation/dread thing that’s been happening in his head.

Mu Qingfang shows Shen Qingqiu in. “Would you like some tea first? Or shall we visit the garden?”

Shen Qingqiu looks perfectly put together, as he has without fail, except for the time he nearly died from a qi deviation. His outer robes are a light green today, with darker green on his flowy sleeves and around the shoulders. His hair is pulled neatly back from his face and held with a silver crown in the shape of flames. “The weather is good, Mu Shidi, and I very much want to see your collection.”

Unable to prevent a smile, Mu Qingfang wonders, *is he really a gigantic nerd at heart*? “Great, let’s go.”

They follow a walkway around to the right side of Mu Qingfang’s home. Qian Cao peak is a bit hillier than most of the other peaks, so they have to walk up a low slope to get to the garden. This section isn’t particularly manicured so it’s mostly an open meadow on either side of the walkway. The garden itself is fenced in to prevent pests like deer and other wildlife from nibbling on the poisonous plants.

A wooden gate marks the entrance, and Mu Qingfang is glad that the hinges are smooth. The humid morning air is warm, and most of the leaves sparkle with dew. “Over this way I have some Dragon’s Flame Oleander,” Mu Qingfang says. “One of my favorites. The flowers look

like small dragons and when the pollen is ready, it explodes from the 'mouth' of the dragon. You can see the barrier keeping the pollen contained." He gestures at the stakes around the plants, each one with a small array carved into it.

"Clever," Shen Qingqiu observes. "Does this plant have any medicinal purposes? What are the effects of the pollen if inhaled?"

Bouncing on his feet a little, Mu Qingfang says, "Oh! I'm glad you asked. It's quite poisonous to humans, of course. The spores are neurotoxic and cause prolonged pain and muscle spasms that progress to full paralysis-"

"-And you keep this in your *garden*?" Shen Qingqiu raises his eyebrows.

"What? It's contained." Mu Qingfang protests. "Anyway, for many *demon* species, the pollen from this plant is harvested and condensed into pills which treat energy imbalances. It's a good source of yang, obviously."

"Obviously," Shen Qingqiu echoes, the corner of his mouth lifting in amusement. "Please," he says, "Show me *more*."

So Mu Qingfang does. He introduces Shen Qingqiu to the semi sentient vine with no name that produces fruits which at first glance look like peaches except the insides are filled with Acid Ants. Not to worry! He explains that it's only dangerous if you *eat* the peaches! If you leave them alone they die on the vine. Mu Qingfang indicates the small sign posted that reads: **Ant Filled Peaches, do not eat!**

He earns a chuckle from Shen Qingqiu when he spies the sign, and even glimpses the elusive dimple! Ah! Too handsome, too handsome. Of course, Mu Qingfang thinks this is just objective reality! Literally *anyone* would think Shen Qingqiu is a good looking man.

After that, he shows Shen Shixiong a Creeping Blood Bush. It kind of reminds him of Liu Qingge. This cultivar gets aggressively territorial, sending out tendrils everywhere. This plant is not in the ground, but in a very large ceramic pot to prevent it from becoming invasive. It doesn't fruit, but has very large, very *sharp* thorns, and is a bit bloodthirsty. It senses body heat and then extends prehensile tendrils in that direction. In the demon realm it's said to be carnivorous and suspected to have an underground network that interacts with others of its species, similar to the way that fungi are able to communicate.

Mu Qingfang picks up a small stick and tosses it toward the bush. While they watch, two vines whip out and crush the stick. The vines wilt, as if they're disappointed. "I know," Mu Qingfang tells it. "I didn't mean to tease you."

"You…talk to the plants?" Shen Qingqiu asks.

"Well, yes," Mu Qingfang says, sheepishly. "I got used to talking to patients that are unresponsive, you know, and that habit kind of just…carried over…" He ducks his head, a little embarrassed.

Shen Qingqiu doesn't say anything, but Mu Qingfang feels the weight of his attention. He glances up and indeed, finds Shen Shixiong's dark green eyes searching his face. Mu Qingfang feels a rush of heat over his face, and clears his throat, looking away.

"Ah, Shen Shixiong, just wait until you see what's down at the end of the row!" Mu Qingfang nearly got jump-scared into an early grave the first time he wandered past. He reaches out and tugs Shen Shixiong's sleeve a little. "Come on, I can't wait to see your reaction."

Snorting a little, Shen Qingqiu says wryly, "I had no idea that Mu Shidi was so *enthusiastic* about gardening."

"Well, I like monsters," Mu Qingfang says, distracted. "And demonic plants are the next best thing, you'll see." Toward the end of the row the air is noticeably chillier. When they reach the last section of plants, their boots start crunching.

Shen Qingqiu looks down. "Is that frost?" He frowns, glancing about at the obvious warm and humid day. "Mu Shidi what *are* you growing over here?"

Grinning like an idiot, Mu Qingfang bounces on his toes for a moment. "It's a Snow Lion Bush! Come see!" It's so cool, he knows that he's being stupidly happy about this but like. Airplane's worldbuilding was so freaking cool sometimes!

The Snow Lion bush is thicker than it is wide, with shiny, dark green leaves that have pointy edges like a holly bush. *Also* like a holly bush, the Snow Lion Bush has red berries in clumps of two, so that the clusters of leaves appear to have little red eyes! Shen Yuan *loves* this thing! Naturally, of course, the berries are *extremely* poisonous.

Just as they reach the end of the row a small burst of snow explodes out from the Snow Lion Bush in a frosty cloud. Shen Qingqiu blinks in surprise and then laughs out loud. Mu Qingfang can't help but cracking up too. This fierce demonic plant just…spits snowballs everywhere! While they're laughing it spews another burst of snow at them.

Shen Qingqiu's eyes meet Mu Qingfang's and it feels like something snapping into place. For a long moment, they're just straight up grinning at each other.

"Mu Shidi is certainly full of surprises these days," Shen Qingqiu says, smile lingering as he watches the Snow Lion Bush.

"Shang Shixiong came across one of these a few months ago and thought it might have some medicinal value. It doesn't, not for humans anyway, but it's so …*cute* that I couldn't get rid of it." Mu Qingfang confesses.

Shen Qingqiu snorts. "Only you could think a demonic plant is *cute*."

"What can I say, I like dangerous things." Mu Qingfang quips.

"I'm seeing that," Shen Qingqiu with a tone that almost sounds *fond*.

“Those are the most fun,” Shen Yuan says, “though I’ll show you the rest. It’s just that these guys-” He jerks his head in the direction of the demonic plants, “Are the most entertaining.” He shrugs. “The rest are just pretty.” He meets Shen Qingqiu’s eyes. “Some of them smell really good, too.”

Shen Shixiong hums in appreciation and they meander through the garden.

“Mu Shidi…” Shen Qingqiu says while watching a bird land on the fence. He doesn’t say anything else, though, so Mu Qingfang glances over. Frowning, Shen Qingqiu says, “Mu Shidi seems much different than I recall during our disciple days.”

Mu Qingfang goes still. “Oh? In what way?”

Head tilted to the side, Shen Qingqiu gives him that searching glance again. “Perhaps my memories are faulty. I remember Mu Shidi being a much more…*distant* person than he is these days.”

Shen Yuan bites his lip. “I think I’ve been burned out for a while,” he offers.

“Meaning what, exactly?” Shen Qingqiu says, frowning.

“Well, it’s like this,” Mu Qingfang says. “For a very long time, I was just focused on doing everyday work. Trying to keep people alive, trying to keep other people from killing themselves out of a lack of care, or effort, all with the knowledge that we live in a dangerous world, and there’s going to be losses no matter what I did.” He looks down, kicking at the dirt clumps. “But a few months back, I realized that just because the patient may die, it doesn’t make the *effort* worthless.”

Shen Qingqiu says nothing to that, so Mu Qingfang keeps talking. “There’s this old man who lives in the extended care section of Qian Cao. He has a progressive memory disorder. These kinds of conditions will get worse, no matter what I do. But you know what? It’s the *condition* that’s hopeless, not the *patient*.”

“What do you mean?” Shen Qingqiu asks, giving him hard eye contact.

Shrugging a little, Mu Qingfang says, “The patient thinks he’s *ten*. He wakes up and wants his mother.”

Shen Qingqiu’s lips thin, and an expressionless mask drops over his face.

“So if I comfort that patient-who currently has the mind of a *child*, that is not *worthless*,” Mu Qingfang stresses. “It’s *meaningful*. To the patient, but also to *me*.”

Somehow Mu Qingfang has forgotten to be nervous. He’s forgotten to be self conscious, forgotten to be concerned about being found out as a fraud. He’s not sure why, but he feels like it’s a settled issue. *He* is the only Mu Qingfang that will be living in this body, and he needs to start acting like it.

So when Shen Qingqiu comments on his ‘former ’behavior, Mu Qingfangdoesn’t become stress about it. The words just flow right off his tongue. It’s only after they’re walking back to Mu Qingfang’s residence that he realizes how much of himself he’s revealed to maybe the most clever person in the entire sect.

Shen Qingqiu doesn’t seem overly concerned though. He’s not threatening to out Mu Qingfang or questioning why he did certain things fifteen years ago, or whatever. So it’s fine, right?

There’s a sealed package with a stasis talisman waiting for them on Mu Qingfang’s front porch. “Ah! Perfect,” he says happily. “I’m pretty sure these are the sweets from Zui Xian.”

“How did you manage that minor miracle?” Shen Qingqiu asks. “They usually are not so generous.”

After he retrieves the package from the ground, Mu Qingfang says, “Oh, I did some disciples a favor a while back. They had a kitchen mishap and had some severe burns which I treated.” He grins at Shen Qingqiu. “But I didn’t report them. Every so often they send me little treats. Hey, I’m not above taking the occasional kickback, especially if it’s food.”

He pushes open the door, and sets the box down on the table. “I’ll make tea. Go ahead and open that Shixiong, hopefully it’s something you’d like to share with me.”

Shen Qingqiu replies, “All right,” but just seems to be standing there watching the box like it might spit a snowball at him.

Mu Qingfang gets busy heating water with a talisman. He glances over, and sees Shen Qingqiu looking at a piece of paper quizzically. He tucks it away in his sleeve, so he must have dropped something.

Eventually Shen Qingqiu sits down and pulls a small knife from his sleeve, cutting the string holding it closed. “Oh, these are-” He frowns. “I don’t know *what* these are, actually. But they smell *delicious*.” He peers at them inquisitively.

“Those good boys,” Mu Qingfang calls from the kitchen “The sent over water chestnut cakes. I just love them, I hope you will enjoy them as much. Please sit, Shixiong, and make yourself comfortable.”

Shen Qingqiu settles into a chair and the tea is ready shortly. Mu Qingfang sets the tea service down and puts out a plate and cup for each of them. “Why dont you serve the cakes while I pour.” After the words leave his mouth, Mu Qingfang feels odd. Why does this feel so domestic?

Producing his sharp knife again, Shen Qingqiu dives the cake into four equal sections as Mu Qingfang takes a seat across from him. “Mn. Sticky,” Shen Qingqiu murmurs, using his knife to slide a piece onto a plate. He pushes the plate over to Mu Qingfang and then easily serves himself a piece.

Mu Qingfang watches eagerly as Shen Qingqiu takes his first bite. Shen Shixiong's eyes close for a brief moment, and Mu Qingfang can't help tracking the movement of his lips, the way his tongue peeps out, catching a stray crumb.

"*Oh*, this is…" Shen Qingqiu takes a deep breath. "*Very* good."

Feeling suddenly hot, Mu Qingfang finds it difficult to swallow. For some reason. He wants to feed Shen Shixiong cake every day if it will make him look like this…

Or *sound* like that.

"Well, what are you waiting for," Shen Qingqiu prods. "Eat!"

Mu Qingfang's stomach flutters at the intense look he gets, and obediently takes a bite. It's so much better than he remembers. "*Fuck*," he says softly, after the first bite. He closes his eyes and hums. When he glances across at Shen Qingqiu he notices the other man's cheeks are flushed. It must be too hot in here! Mu Qingfang definitely feels too warm.

"How are things going on Qing Jing?" Mu Qingfang asks after a moment of scrambling for an appropriate topic.

Arching an eyebrow, Shen Qingqiu takes a sip of tea. "Tedious," he says finally. "It would be much better for my sanity if teenagers were confined to their own peak."

That honest answer surprises a laugh out of Mu Qingfang. "Could it be any worse than Bai Zhan peak?"

Shen Qingqiu snorts. "Well, it depends on if the peak lord is in residence or not, I suppose. Though you may be as good a judge as I."

Yes, Mu Qingfang thinks. He certainly gets plenty of customers from that Peak. OG Qingfang had at one point considered a small satellite healing office over there, but he couldn't manage any volunteers. "Oh, I always know when Liu Qingge has arrived. The influx usually starts two to three hours directly after and continues for half a day."

"To expand on your question, Shidi, my little beasts are doing fine, even your favorite." Shen Qingqiu gives him a direct look.

"Binghe's not my *favorite*," Shen Yuan lies through his teeth.

"Mu Shidi, *please*, you barely managed that with a straight face." Shen Qingqiu accuses, eyes warm.

"Okay, *fine*," Mu Qingfang allows, "he's just a cute little kid, that's all. He's so…fluffy."

"The funny thing is that Luo Binghe would *die* if he ever heard you talking about him like that." Shen Qingqiu smirks.

"Yes, well, it's the age. They're so easily embarrassed." Mu Qingfang says. "More tea?" He gestures to the teapot.

“No, but I would not decline another piece of cake.” Shen Qingqiu nods at the remaining pieces. “Give me your plate.” Efficiently, Shen Qingqiu doles out the cake.

This time, Mu Qingfang feels a lot more self conscious, especially because Shen Qingqiu seems to be *specifically* waiting for him to eat his. He can’t take this kind of pressure, Shixiong! You’re looking at a dumb millennial that used to eat *tons* of junk food! He can’t resist these delicacies! He decides to ignore the weighted gaze and takes a bite.

Immediately, he forgets he’s being watched, closing his eyes and humming with pleasure. “*Fuck*” he says, drawing out the word like he can taste it. This cake is so---so *crisp* yet chewy on the inside. It’s sweet but also nutty.

He sucks the sticky residue from his fingers, and happens to look over at Shen Qingqiu. Shen Shixiong’s aura flares and Mu Qingfang freezes. Shen Qingqiu gives him an expression that’s rather startling in its intensity.

“Sorry, my manners-”

“It’s fine,” Shen Qingqiu says hoarsely and shifts on his seat. The Qing Jing peak lord glances down at the table for a moment before pinning Mu Qingfang with his gaze. “I must return to my peak,” he says.

Mu Qingfang deflates. “Yes, of course. I mean, Shixiong is surely busy-”

But Shen Qingqiu just shakes his head a little. “I have some paperwork I must turn in, fairly urgently. I was not expecting…” His expression softens. “It was a pleasant afternoon.”

Feeling at a loss, Mu Qingfang awkwardly stands up. “I really enjoyed spending time with you. Thanking Shixiong.”

Shen Qingqiu takes a step closer and all at once, Mu Qingfang remembers his little fantasy that he had, right in this very room. Was Shen Shixiong always so tall?

“Perhaps Shidi might help me with my hands later this week, if he has time?” Shen Qingqiu inquires.

“Oh, of course! Anytime,” Mu Qingfang assures him with a smile.

Inclining his head, Shen Qingqiu says, “Good evening.”

After the door closes behind him, Mu Qingfang sinks back down into his chair. Why…why does the house feel so *empty* now? He sighs, and then cringes. He sounds like a lovelorn maiden, he scolds himself.

A knock comes to the door while Mu Qingfang is busy replaying every single moment of the afternoon. “Come in,” he calls expecting his head disciple.

Wu Yanshin greets him with a smile. “Did Shizun have an enjoyable afternoon? The little ones told me you visited them this morning.”

Laughing, Mu Qingfang says, “Yes, they were having a lovely time throwing dirt at each other. Silly children. Yanshin, you should have seen their faces when they realized I was there.” He remembers the moments fondly. Then the image of Shen Qingqiu laughing while a demonic plant throws snow at him pops into his brain. Shixiong…really is…quite…

He’s so lost in his thoughts that he completely misses half of Wu Yanshin’s voice. He catches only, “--brought the form himself to be filed.”

“Oh, that’s good then,” Mu Qingfang says, having no idea what she’s talking about.

“It’s good that you discussed it.” Wu Yanshin says approvingly. “I’m proud of you, Renshu, I know it was difficult.”

“Ah. Well,” he really can’t say too much without giving away that he was only pretending to be listening.

“You should try and spend more time with him, especially if he makes you so happy.” Wu Yanshin says. “Enjoy the rest of your time off.” She smiles and slips away.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: Oh, something fell to the...floor...*tucks it into sleeve*

SQQ: watching MQF eat his cake. *Eyes dilating* *Hard staring*
SQQ: Watching MQF *lick his fingers* I'm not going to survive this.

SQQ: leaves MQF's house goes IMMEDIATELY to the healing pavilion to turn in form after he signs it

Wu Yanshin: Oh thank the gods! Somehow he actually DID what I told him to!

I will enhance human health conditions

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: Minor character death.

I dont know how to warn for this-MQF makes the patient 'comfortable' but really he hastens the dying process

If you wish to skip that part, look away when it says,
"In a private room of the main ward-"

You can start reading again at "Mu Qingfang goes back to his house-"

Please definitely leave me a comment if you think I should tag this or if you would like a synopsis of that scene.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next couple of days pass in a blur, in which Mu Qingfang spends entirely too much time thinking about Shen Qingqiu. Since he's banned from patient care for those two days, he amused himself by returning to the Qian Cao peak library and reading through more of OG Qingfang's work.

Turns out, OG Qingfang authored a very dry how-to manual for dual cultivation. Mu Qingfang's not sure who the audience for this was supposed to be, but he finds it useful anyway.

He figures that he at least ought to know the basics of dual cultivation between men, especially since he's supposed to be an expert at it. He's not sure how he feels about the entire process of *opening someone up*...it sounds so…intimate. Maybe….if it's with the right person it's okay? He's not sure.

Dutifully, he reads the materials and when he's finished with the manual Mu Qingfang thinks he would at least be competent at it, in case of emergency. Still. Dual cultivation with a random person, or worse, an acquaintance feels deeply off putting.

He accidentally finds some articles from Gusu regarding the benefits of musical cultivation upon chronic qi deviations. Mu Qingfang wonders if Shen Qingqiu is aware of these materials. Surely, he must be, right?

Later Wu Yanshin stops by his house to give him an update on all the current patients on the main ward. "Liu Shibo left the mountain again, so now we've got run of the mill injuries

from Bai Zhan-"

Mu Qingfang interprets that to mean the children have been working out disagreements with their fists and swords instead of using their words. He sighs.

"-There are a couple of snake bites from Ling Yu but the disciples were treated early enough that nobody should be losing any limbs. We hope." Wu Yanshin runs a hand over her forehead. "Shizun…Xiang Xue is not doing well. He fell early this morning and his right trochanter just…snapped. He also has several broken ribs." She pauses, meeting his eyes. "He's already running a fever."

Mu Qingfang closes his eyes for a moment. "I will see him this morning," and his tone leaves no room for argument. He at least wants to say goodbye to the man. A fall in an elderly patient without cultivation is often catastrophic, for exactly the reasons seen here. Breaking a long bone like the femur can lead to fatty embolisms. Rib fractures often result in pneumonia, as the patient is unable to take deep enough breaths to keep the lungs clear. The fever is an early indication of this. "Do we know if he has any family?"

Tightening her lips, Wu Yanshin says, "He has no known family." She doesn't have to say it-once he became a part of Qian Cao peak, *they* became his family.

In the modern world, where surgery and antibiotics are options, he might make it through this crisis, but would be unlikely to ever walk again. But here…

"Anything else, Yanshin?" Mu Qingfang asks quietly.

"No, Shizun," Wu Yanshin answers in the same tone. "Let me know if I can-"

Mu Qingfang forces a strained smile to his lips. "You're doing it already. Thank you."

In a private room of the main ward, Xiang Xue's skin looks papery-thin and pale. Dark purple bruises rim his eyes and there's a scabbed over abrasion on his cheek. He's laying flat on his back with the head of the bed elevated a little.

Mu Qingfang sits down at the chair by his bed. He carefully takes Xiang Xue's hand. There's blood under his fingernails. "Hello A-Xue, it's Mu-gege. I heard you had a bad night. I'm sorry you got hurt. Are you having any pain?"

Xiang Xue doesn't answer, or move at all. He takes several rapid breaths in a row and then stops breathing for ten seconds. Then the cycle repeats.

The modern name for this pops into Mu Qingfang's head: Cheyne-stokes respirations. Mu Qingfang's not sure why his download included bits and pieces of modern medicine, but. It's nice to know the name for things.

Mu Qingfang gets up and checks Xiang Xue's pupils. They're unequal, a terrible sign. The right one is blown. *Fuck*. His pulse is weak and thready, barely palpable. Likely he's going into shock. Mu Qingfang sits back down, and picks up the old man's hand again.

“I was looking forward to visiting you again,” Mu Qingfang says. “I wanted to take you for another walk. The lavender is in bloom right now, and the flowers are so pretty. If you stand downwind, the air is just delicious.”

A-Xue doesn’t answer.

Mu Qingfang continues speaking, telling him funny stories about his little sister and how much trouble she used to get into. As time passes, Mu Qingfang notices beads of sweat at Xiang Xue’s hairline. He lets go of his hand, and feels the elderly man’s forehead. He’s cool and clammy. When Mu Qingfang picks A-Xue’s hand up again, his fingertips have turned a dark blue.

He can’t transfuse blood. He doesn’t have vasopressors. He has no way to stop the brain herniation.

He can’t stop this process.

But he can speed it up. He can make it painless.

“A-Xue,” Mu Qingfang says. “I think your Mama is waiting for you at the Naihe bridge. When you see her, tell her I’m sorry.”

He lays a hand on Xiang Xue’s chest and with a precise burst of qi, he stops Xiang Xue’s heart.

Xiang Xue exhales, and his chest does not rise again.

He pulls the sheet slowly up to cover his face. “Good bye, A-Xue.”

Mu Qingfang goes back to his house and sits down at the table, holding his head in his hands. He doesn’t move for a very long time.

Needless to say he feels like dogshit the next day, so he spends his last day of enforced vacation lying around and staring at the ceiling or wandering listlessly through the garden.

When Wu Yanshin stops by to give him the daily update, he ignores the knocking.

“Not today, Yanshin,” Mu Qingfang calls from his bedroom. He’s lying on his back, hair down, with one arm thrown over his eyes.

His front door opens and footsteps approach. Because of *course* everyone ignores a closed fucking door!

The foot steps get closer and stop in his room.

“What is it?” Mu Qingfang says tiredly.

“You look quite pathetic today, Mu Shidi,” Shen Qingqiu says, and Mu Qingfang flings himself upright in a panic.

“Shen Qingqiu! What are you?” -*doing here* Mu Qingfang’s meaning to say, but Shen Qingqiu interrupts him before he can complete his thought.

Shen Qingqiu takes up most of the doorway, as he leans against the doorframe. “Get up. Get yourself cleaned up. I have to go down into town and you’re coming with me, since you have nothing better to do.”

Mu Qingfang opens his mouth and then just closes it again. Does he really think he’s going to win an argument against *Shen Qingqiu*??!

“I’ll be making tea,” Shen Qingqiu turns and walks out. “Hurry *up*.”

Shen Yuan screams internally while he splashes water on his face, refreshes himself with a burst of qi, and pulls on some actual outer robes. Oh, fuck, his hair- okay. Just something simple is fine, right? Mu Qingfang combs it out quickly, and then pulls it into a basic ponytail. Good enough, right? Wait, wait, wait!!

He goes back and grabs his qiankun pouch, the one that’s filled with all sorts of medical supplies, and stuffs it into his sleeves. Because if he *doesn’t* take it, then he will *definitely* need it!

He enters the kitchen and finds Shen Shixiong has already prepared tea and has his cup filled and waiting. Mu Qingfang clears his throat. “Thanking Shen Shixiong.” The tea, of course, is delicious, and he feels much better after a small sip. “Seriously, thanks.” He meets Shen Qingqiu’s eyes.

Shen Shixiong snorts, and rolls his eyes. “Well. I suppose I *could* have ignored the message your head disciple sent me, stating that you were *moping* and could this master see fit to visit her Shizun.”

Rubbing the back of his neck, Mu Qingfang says awkwardly. “Ah. Sorry about that.”

“Did I ask for an apology?” Shen Qingqiu raises an eyebrow. “Then don’t give me one. I had to run some errands anyway, it was easy enough to come collect you.” He drinks some tea and then adds, “Perhaps Wu Shizhi could give my head disciple some instruction on being *proactive*, as Ming Fan likes to wait for specific instruction before he does *anything*.”

Snorting, Mu Qingfang says, “He had no problem bullying his Shidi though.”

Shen Qingqiu swats at him with his closed fan, and Mu Qingfang yelps and ducks. “Yes,” Shen Qingqiu says sharply. “I recall the event. It has not been repeated to my knowledge. But who knows? Your favorite little beast likes to pretend that everything’s fine while he gets beaten into the dirt without complaint.”

Although he can still be intimidating, Shen Qingqiu's particular brand of communication is rather *cute*. He's entirely capable of loading that paper fan with qi and using it as a deadly weapon, so just using it to whack people is kind of adorable.

Shen Shixiong's expression softens a little bit and Mu Qingfang wonders just what has his own face been doing. (Gods, he really hopes he hasn't been giving him some kind of dumbstruck look) "Drink your tea, you still look half asleep."

"Thanking Shixiong for his tender care," Mu Qingfang says sweetly, ducks another swat, and starts drinking.

Once their tea cups have been drained, they take to their swords and fly down to the town in the valley where there's a healthy shopping district. Although the sect provides the necessities, personal items are always better off to be purchased. That reminds him, he needs to pick up some incense for his shrine.

They fly close enough to carry on conversation on the trip down the mountain. Shen Qingqiu tells him he requires some new brushes and inkstones, and was planning on visiting the bookstore.

Mu Qingfang signs on for that! "I have a distinct lack of novels in my life," he laughs, "and medical reading gets boring pretty quick."

Shen Shixiong glances over in surprise after that quip, making Mu Qingfang wonder how out of character he's become. It's fine! Totally fine!

After they land just outside of town, Shen Qingqiu leads him to the shop that sells calligraphy supplies. Some of the ink stones are really beautiful, decorated with looming dragons or fierce beasts. Shen Shixiong's eyes linger on one that has detailed flowering vines rimming the outside.

The shop also sells ink sticks, but those Shen Qingqiu turns his nose at. "I can make better ones," he says dismissively, right in front of the shop keeper, and Mu Qingfang winces a bit.

Mu Qingfang discovers the incense display on the far wall, and wanders over to pick some out. He gets lost in smelling lots of different scents. Eventually he senses a presence behind him

"What are you looking for?" Shen Qingqiu inquires. He peers over Mu Qingfang's shoulder.

"I've been looking for a floral incense but something that's not too strong. The one I've been using is too musky." Mu Qingfang says, still eyeing the merchandise.

"How about this one?" Shen Qingqiu suggests, tapping the display. "I use this sometimes. It's floral with an undertone of cloves." He's so close that Mu Qingfang smells his jasmine hair oil.

Shen Qingqiu pulls out a package of incense and swans off to purchase it while Mu Qingfang is left speechless. Did that just happen?? While he's standing around like an idiot, Shen

Shixiong pays for his items, including Mu Qingfang's incense.

"Shidi," Shen Qingqiu calls, "Is your head full of fluff today? Come along!"

Snickering a little, Mu Qingfang gets moving. "Thanking Shixiong," he says and immediately gets swatted with a fan.

"Stop apologizing, when I don't ask you to." Shen Qingqiu says crossly. "If you do it again, I might really get angry."

"I definitely do not want that," Mu Qingfang says, deadly serious, with a grin still on his face.

Shen Qingqiu sniffs and ignores that comment. "The bookshop is just a few doors up the street." After a moment he asks, "Do you like any particular novels?"

Thinking about this a bit, Mu Qingfang says, "I used to enjoy reading really terrible novels, just to tear them apart."

Brightening, Shen Qingqiu says, "That does sound amusing."

The bookstore is more dimly lit, but *oh* so many books! Mu Qingfang just barely manages not to bounce happily on the balls of his feet. He leaves Shen Qingqiu to his own devices and wanders through the aisles.

After some searching he finds what he's looking for. Trashy novels!! Oh, here's one about a God who was banished to earth, who eventually falls in love with a Ghost King. Mu Qingfang considers this one, but it actually doesn't sound too bad.

Wait, wait, no it's definitely going to be *this* one where a flower fairy accidentally sets an imprisoned demon free. It's got every single bad trope in the world! Body swapping, characters making idiotic decisions for no good reasons, everybody except the protagonist has 40 IQ, there's even-Mu Qingfang rolls his eyes- There's even a death with resurrection! Like. Come on.

That's Airplant Shooting Towards the Sky levels of idiocy. He loves it!

Gleefully, he snags the book and continues wandering through the store. Eventually Mu Qingfang looks up.

The girl at the counter gestures to him, and calls, "Your friend said to tell you he was going to be next door at the tea house."

"Thank you," Mu Qingfang tells her, handing over his book so she can wrap it. He completes the purchase and adds it to his sleeve.

Outside it seems ridiculously bright. Once his eyes adjust, he spies Shen Qingqiu sitting at an outdoor table drinking tea and fanning himself. Mu Qingfang takes a moment just to watch unobtrusively.

Shen Shixiong makes a pretty picture sitting there. Robes and hair perfect, idly fanning himself. His face is relaxed and he looks content. He looks…really good, actually. Mu Qingfang's breath catches and his heart flutters for a few beats.

I'm too young for atrial fibrillation, Mu Qingfang thinks and heads over. He sees the exact moment that Shen Shixiong sees him.

Shen Qingqiu's dark green eyes widen and then the corner of his lip curves up. Mu Qingfang meets his eyes and can't look away. A small flicker of heat curls in his stomach.

"Hi," Mu Qingfang says, taking a seat at the small table. "Sorry I took so long, I got a little distracted."

"Was that a *little*?" Shen Qingqiu drawls. "My goodness. I'd hate to see what a *lot* looks like." That little smile just lingers on the edges of his mouth.

Mu Qingfang wonders if Shen Qingqiu's lips are soft. They look soft. *Wait, what?* What is he even thinking?! *Alexa, is it gay to look at your male friends lips?*

His head snaps to the side when someone cries out from the other side of the street. Mu Qingfang sits up, leaning to the side so he can see.

A rough looking man is dragging a kid out from behind one of the street vendors. He's got the kid by the elbow, and throws him to the ground.

Mu Qingfang stands up, incensed. "Let go of that boy, you're hurting him!" He gathers his qi and leaps across the street. He lands near the vendor's cart and now he can see that the boy is holding a steamed bun in his hand. It's covered in dust from the street and there's already a bite out of it.

The kid is crying, and trying to dig his *bare feet* into the street, but the man just flings the boy down by his arm. Mu Qingfang hears the bone break.

"You mother fucker," he says, making a seal with his hands.

"Handle the boy," Shen Qingqiu says coldly, landing right next to him. "I will take care of … *that*."

Confident that Shen Shixiong can handle the disgusting excuse for a man, Mu Qingfang turns to the boy in the street. He's holding his injured arm close to his body.

"Hi there," he says. "I'm a doctor, can I take a look at your arm? I can fix you right up."

Suspiciously, the boy swipes at his eyes. Then he looks away, attention on Shen Qingqiu who looks pleasantly calm while he neatly dislocates the man's arm.

"How does it feel when someone stronger than you breaks your arm?" Shen Qingqiu asks, voice like ice. "Does it feel *good* when you hurt children?" The man is flailing on the ground

in seconds, while Shen Qingqiu looms over him like an avenging god.

“That’s my friend,” Mu Qingfang says to the boy. “I’m Mu Qingfang, we’re both from Cang Qiong mountain sect.”

The boy, if anything, looks more terrified. “ I-Immortal masters!”

“May I examine you?” Mu Qingfang asks. “You can say no, but I would like to treat your pain at least.”

The child, who may be anywhere from seven to twelve, finally nods. His dark brown hair is filthy and matted at the ends. His cheekbones are way too prominent. Mu Qingfang manages to get the kid to get out of the street and back onto the pedestrian area.

Once they’re out of the street, Mu Qingfang says, “All right, may I feel your wrist? I’m going to use my qi to do a quick exam. It won’t hurt.”

“Do you promise?” The boy asks.

Mu Qingfang smiles gently. “I do. I would tell you if something would cause pain, and that is a promise.” The boy gives him a long look and then carefully holds out his wrist on the arm that’s not broken.

Using his qi delicately, Mu Qingfang scans him. Malnutrition, headache, stomach pain, wounds on his feet and of course, the broken humerus bone. He’s also got a badly wrenched shoulder on that side. So much that it’s nearly dislocated. He withdraws his fingertips and meets the boy’s eyes. “Do you want to know what I found?”

Hesitantly, the boy nods.

“Your arm is broken right *here*,” Mu Qingfang draws his finger across his own arm, so the boy can see where. “Your shoulder is injured and also needs care. You’re malnourished, and it seems you have some sores on the bottom of your feet. Did I miss anything?”

Looking at the ground, the boy shakes his head. Then he looks up at Mu Qingfang and nods.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” he says. “What did I miss, child?”

“My head hurts,” the boy whispers. “It hurts all the time.”

“Mu Shidi,” Shen Qingqiu interrupts. “Perhaps your patient would care for something to eat? We can rent a tea room across the street.”

“Thanking Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang says. “That’s an excellent idea. Child, will you allow this Mu-gege to get some food into you, and then you can decide if you want me to fix your arm. Most situations look a little better when you’re not so hungry.” He very slowly reaches out and lightly pats the boy’s head. “What’s your name?”

“Cheng Delun,” the boy says, glancing between the two immortal masters.

A few minutes later, Shen Qingqiu speaks with the waitstaff at the tea house and they go back to the private room. The waiter quickly brings them a pot of tea.

“Can you bring some baozi, and chicken broth if you have it?” Shen Qingqiu asks. To Cheng Delun he says, “If you eat too fast it will make you sick. So when the broth comes, take *small sips*.”

“Yes, immortal master.”

“Lun-er, come sit,” Mu Qingfang pats the chair. Once Cheng Delun is settled, Mu Qingfang says, “Now. I will use my qi to heal the muscles around your shoulder. Try to stay still for Mu-gege, hmm?” He cups his hands around the shoulder, and uses his qi to coax the torn fibers back together. “Good boy!” Mu Qingfang says. “You did so well.”

“It feels better, Mu-gege.” Cheng Delun says, surprised.

“Mu Qingfang is an excellent healer,” Shen Qingqiu says.

Startled into a smile, Mu Qingfang glances over at him. “Shen Shixiong, you were so quiet I forgot you were there.” He turns his smile on the boy. “Did *you* forget about Shen gege?”

Cheng Delun tries not to smile. “Noo, he was there the whole time.”

“Yes! So he was. Shen gege is very clever, though. So keep your eyes on him.” Cheng Delun nods. “All right. This part will hurt for a few seconds, and then it will be over, okay?” Mu Qingfang explains. “I have to get the bones to meet-” He mimes this action by clasping his own hands together, threading his fingers. “Once they’re together I can mend them, *that* part won’t hurt, but it will probably feel *weird*. He meets Cheng Delun’s eyes. “What do you think? Should I fix it?”

“If it will only hurt for a little while, that’s all right,” Cheng Delun says. “I can take anything if it’s just for a little while.”

Abruptly, Shen Qingqiu turns around. His back looks very straight.

“Okay. Here goes.” Mu Qingfang applies tension to the arm and feels when it comes back together. Immediately he applies qi, and senses the bones mending. But-oh dear. This kid needs to eat otherwise he will be in danger of a rebreak if he uses his arm to bear any weight. “How was that?”

Frowning, the child says, “I thought it would be worse.”

“Yes, Mu Shidi gets that reaction quite a bit,” Shen Qingqiu says, voice oddly strained. He turns and meets Mu Qingfang’s eyes. “We should feed our new friend.”

Our.

A flash of warmth uncurls in Mu Qingfang’s chest, and he suffers the urge to capture Shen Qingqiu in a hug. Instead he blinks slowly and smiles. “Yes, Shixiong.”

The meal is fairly quiet. Shen Qingqiu watches the boy like a hawk, prepared to intervene if he starts eating too fast.

It's giving Mu Qingfang a bit of a heartache, thinking that his intimidating Shixiong was once a hungry street kid. He's pretty sure that's how Shen Qingqiu knows exactly what the kid should eat.

"Lun-er," Mu Qingfang starts. "Do you have any family around?"

"No, Mu-gege." Cheng Delun looks down at his bowl full of broth. "My father sold me to slavers but I escaped."

"Is there anyone else that will be worried about you?" Shen Qingqiu asks suddenly and the child freezes. Shen Qingqiu waves a hand in the air. "I don't want to *kidnap* you, silly thing. I am asking if we need to take anyone else with us. You will need ongoing care or your arm won't heal right."

Shen Yuan hears the unspoken echo of what Shen Qingqiu doesn't say. *Ask me how I know.*

"Sometimes the…the ladies give me food. Or they let me sleep in the back where the roof hangs over and it doesn't get so wet."

Shen Qingqiu sighs. "Yes," he agrees quietly. "That's a good place." To Mu Qingfang he says, "We should inform the ladies that Cheng Delun will be coming with us, so they don't worry." He looks especially tense as he speaks.

"Okay." Mu Qingfang says simply, not seeing the problem.

"You don't want to ask me any questions?" Shen Qingqiu demands sharply.

"If you wanted me to know more, you would simply say. Why would I ask, if you didn't?" Mu Qingfang says, genuinely mystified.

"Mu Shidi, you…" For a moment Shen Qingqiu looks a little lost. Then he pulls his expressionless mask back to his face. "Very well." He looks at Cheng Delun. "After you have eaten we will notify your friends, if of course, you agree to return with us back to the sect so you may heal."

Cheng Delun goes pale. "Immortal master….my spirit veins are bad. A rogue cultivator checked for me one time."

Mu Qingfang frowns. He'd thought Lun-er's meridians were…fine?

"Let me check." Shen Qingqiu says and the boy extends his wrist. After a brief touch, Shen Qingqiu leans back. "As I thought. Your spirit veins are adequate. Perhaps the rogue cultivator was trying to protect you from evil men that lurk in the streets." His gaze bores into Cheng Delun. "They are just searching for young boys to use as cauldrons. After they use you up, they discard you like *trash*."

Shen Qingqiu taps the table and looks away. "Eat," he says firmly.

“Oh,” Mu Qingfang says, feeling like an idiot. They’re standing in front of the Warm Red Pavilion, the local brothel.

Chapter End Notes

This ended up being a little longer than I planned!

I'm so sorry- also wasn't intending to kill Xiang Xue! I hope I made it clear that in MQF's mind, he HAD no way to treat him.

SQQ: sees a disgusting man trying to kidnap/hurt a young street kid. "Oh, I'm going to *enjoy* this.

SQQ: I hate seeing myself in this child. I simultaneously hate and love MQF treating this boy with such dignity and care

SQQ: WHAT SO YOU HAVE SOMETHING AGAINST BROTHELS??!!!

MQF: *shit* Nope! Let's go in one immediately!

I love your comments, please come tell me what you think!! <3

And Uphold the Chasteness and Honor of Medicine

Chapter Summary

Chapter Warnings: internalized Acephobia, description of childbirth.

So many thanks to Bamboowraith who helped me talk the most important parts of this chapter through!! I appreciate you so much!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Oh," Mu Qingfang says, feeling like an idiot. They're standing in front of the Warm Red Pavilion, the local brothel.

Shen Qingqiu gives him a sidewise glance, then straightens. "Come." He leads them through the doors.

Inside is…well, it looks rather like a normal restaurant for the time period. A middle aged appearing woman dressed in fine clothes looks up from the counter of a bar. "A-Jiu!" She exclaims, smiling. "You brought friends!"

Expression softening, Shen Qingqiu greets, "Cheng Yi. This is my Shidi, Mu Qingfang. We found one of your pet projects in the streets. Mu Shidi has been treating his injuries and we need to bring him to the sect for further healing."

Qi-ge. Shen Jiu. Cheng Yi. Mu Qingfang understands several things all at once.

First-Shen Qingqiu-a well known patron of the brothels- was not here to sleep with women. Cheng Yi is clearly not a cultivator, so her aging has not been delayed. Second- This is for all intents and purposes, Shen Qingqiu's *sister*. Just like Yue Qingyuan (Qi-ge) is his *brother*. Third, Shen Qingqiu fully expects that Mu Qingfang is going to reject him or else give him grief like Liu Qingge does.

Well, fuck that Mu Qingfang thinks. He smiles, and bows. "It is a pleasure to meet Cheng Yi. It is good that Cheng Delun was able to find safety with you."

Cheng Yi, a very attractive woman, is even more so when she smiles in relief. She shoots a quick glance at Shen Qingqiu, who says nothing, but his shoulders relax a centimeter. "Immortal Master Mu-"

"Ah, none of that please," Mu Qingfang demurs. "Just Mu Qingfang is fine."

“Cheng A-yi, Mu gege fixed my arm and it doesn’t even hurt anymore.” Cheng Delun says. “And Shen gege beat up the man that hurt me.”

Cheng Yi’s warm brown eyes find Shen Qingqiu’s. Shen Qingqiu shrugs and looks away. “Yes.” She says. “Our A-Jiu is kind.”

“Since we are here,” Mu Qingfang says (And Wu Yanshin isn’t here to stop him!) “Is there anyone who requires any medical assistance? I’m happy to take a look for you.”

Clasping her hands together, Cheng Yi gives Shen Qingqiu a significant look. He nods. “Immortal master Mu is also kind,” she says. After a brief hesitation she adds, “One of my girls is upstairs laboring. But she’s not progressing very well…and she’s getting tired.”

Childbirth? Excellent! Mu Qingfang has the download for that! “Take me to her,” he says.

Upstairs they enter a small room where a frighteningly young woman is in bed. She’s pale and sweating, and her hair is roughly tied up on top of her head in a messy bun. Her eyes are closed and she doesn’t open them when they enter.

“Lai Lihua,” Cheng Yi says. “I brought Doctor Mu from A-Jiu’s sect to examine you.”

The girl opens her eyes and squints at Mu Qingfan.

“Hello, Lai Lihua,” Mu Qingfang says gently. “I am Mu Qingfang, the peak lord of Qian Cao peak. Cheng Yi tells me that you’re having a difficult time. May I examine you?”

“Immortal master,” Lai Lihua says, “it *hurts*.”

“I know it does,” Mu Qingfang tells her. “You are doing so well, and being *so* brave. Can I touch your wrist?” She nods, and he scans her.

Thankfully the baby is fine. He’s in the correct position for birth. What’s less fine is that Lai Lihua is very weak. He senses that she’s been laboring for at least two days. He needs to speed this up, lest this end in tragedy.

“Your son is well,” he says, and Lai Lihua bursts into tears.

“I have a son!” She cries, smiling and weeping at the same time.

“Yes, you do.” Mu Qingfang agrees gently. “But my dear, we need to get this child delivered so you can recover. I know you’re tired.”

“I’m *so* tired,” She agrees, wiping her face. Then she grimaces and clutches her stomach.

“I will need clean warm towels, and a basin of clean water and soap. Cheng Yi, please remain to give support to Lai Lihua.” He turns to Lai Lihua. “We need to get you out of that position. Walking would help. I can reduce your pain temporarily.”

“Yes, Mu Yisheng,” she agrees.

It takes Mu Qingfang and Cheng Yi to get Lai Lihua standing at the bedside. She immediately gasps in pain and nearly collapses. “Can you hold her?” he asks Cheng Yi.

Cheng Yi moves to hold Lai Lihua from the front, while Mu Qingfang moves to her back. She’s just in an inner robe.

“I need to remove your robe,” he says. He gets no response, but Cheng Yi says, “Please do what you have to.”

Using his qi, he slices a gash in her robe, parting it. He forms his qi into needles and uses them to block the nerves, something like an epidural. What he wouldn’t give for some bupivacaine!

Her legs get a little weak, and once her pain improves, Lai Lihua is breathing a lot better.

“Okay, Lai Lihua, let’s take a few steps, all right?” Mu Qingfang stands at her side, with one arm around her waist.

Slowly they walk around the room. Then Lai Lihua cries out. “Uh, what is-I’m all sticky!”

“That’s your water breaking,” Mu Qingfang says. “Very normal. You’re doing well!” As they take another turn about the room he adds, “Soon you will feel like you need to push-”

“What do you mean?” Lai Lihua demands.

Mu Qingfang exchanges a glance with Cheng Yi over Lai Lihua’s head. “It means that you’ll feel like you need to have a bowel movement, except it’s not that. It’s the baby putting pressure on that part of your body, wanting to be born.”

“Oh, okay,” she says. Her eyes close, but she doggedly keeps putting one foot in front of the other.

Time passes.

“Mu Yisheng- I think, I think I need to push!” she says, urgently. “It’s--he’s coming!”

“Okay, that’s good. So what we’re going to have you do is lean over the bed,” Mu Qingfang says, and Cheng Yi hurries to arrange the pillows in a large pile that Lai Lihua can lean on.

Mu Qingfang helps the Lai Lihua get arranged. “Now, you’ll have to forgive me, but I need to touch you to see how far you’re dilated. It-It’s going to feel *weird*".

Don’t worry, Shen Yuan thinks, *it’s going to feel weird for me too*! He talks his way through every move, not wanting to traumatize the girl. Almost immediately his fingertips touch something solid. “The baby’s crowning. It’s time to push,” he says. “Bear down like you have to shit,” he tells her bluntly.

Mu Qingfang kneels behind her, and much sooner than he expects- “The head is out! Great job Lai Liahua, now take a breather, don’t push for a minute- " Using his qi, Mu Qingfang gently suctions the baby’s mouth. The cord is not wrapped around his neck, thank all the

gods. The baby's face is tiny and squinched up. Mu Qingfang supports the infant's head and neck. "Okay, it's time to meet your son! *Push,* Lai Liahua, as hard as you can, you can do it-"

Lai Lihua screams, in pain and frustration and exhaustion, and then--

-And then Mu Qingfang is holding an entire *person* in his hands. "Cheng Yi, the towels please." He wraps the infant quickly and carefully. He rubs the tiny arms and pats the little feet. The baby scrunches his face up and *cries*. "Oh, good boy, yes, you are, you beautiful baby!"

"Cheng Yi, can you take him a minute? I need to tie off the cord, then we'll get Lai Lihua comfortable." He passes the baby to the older woman who smiles down at him.

"Hello, precious one," Cheng Yi says softly, swaying her body side to side.

Mu Qingfang digs into his qiankun bag and retrieves some strong silk thread. He ties off the cord in two places and then snips cleanly through the middle. "All right, that's done. Lai LiHua, let's get you sorted now."

The poor thing is so tired she can barely move. His qi needles have already dissipated so she's probably in a good deal of pain. He carefully lifts her up and sets her down on the bed. Fortunately, her water didn't break in the bed so the sheets are relatively clean. He runs a quick scan, and finds nothing besides exhaustion, pain, and mild anemia.

"You did so well, Lai Lihua," Mu Qingfang says, squeezing her hand gently. "Are you ready to meet your son?"

Lai Lihua smiles and nods, reaching out her arms. Cheng Yi settles the baby on Lai Lihua's chest.

"Cheng Yi, are you able to help her with nursing?"

"Yes, Master Mu." Cheng Yi says. Then she smiles. "Please be as kind to A-Jiu. He doesn't seem like it, but his heart is soft."

Mu Qingfang can't help the smile that comes to his face. "I do like him," he says. "Very much."

Nodding, Cheng Yi says, "That's good. Some of the people up on that mountain bring him nothing but grief."

Downstairs he finds Shen Qingqiu reading a book and Cheng Delun sitting next to him at the table with some spare paper and a charcoal pencil practicing characters. Shen Qingqiu looks up as Mu Qingfang descends the stairs.

He keeps his expression impassive until he reaches the table. Then he grins. "It's a boy."

"The girl is well?" Shen Qingqiu asks, frowning.

“Yes, just tired. But she and her son are well.” Mu Qingfang says with relief. *Not bad*, he thinks, considering it’s his first delivery. He glances down at Cheng Delun, still in desperate need of a good bath, another good meal and clean clothes. “I would like to take Cheng Delun back to Qian Cao with me.”

“Fine,” Shen Qingqiu says, getting to his feet. “Cheng Delun, are you still willing to come with us? If you want to, you can learn cultivation after you’re all healed up.”

“Yes, Shen gege,” Cheng Delun says, eyes wide.

Shen Qingqiu offers to take the boy on his sword to Qian Cao, and Mu Qingfang doesn’t bother to argue. Fine by him.

Once they arrive on Qian Cao, Mu Qingfang calls Cheng Delun to his side. “Shen Shixiong…” Mu Qingfang wants to say so many things. Was it only this morning that Shen Qingqiu just barged into his house and dragged him on some errands just to make him feel better?

And now they beat up some asshole, and probably saved a kid's life. And! Mu Qingfang! Delivered! A baby!!!!

Shen Qingqiu meets his eyes, eyebrows raised.

Mu Qingfang ducks his head a little, cheeks heating. “Ah. I’m glad you came and got me this morning, that’s…that’s all.”

“Mn, it was good that Mu Shidi was with me,” Shen Qingqiu agrees. “I will go report to Zhangmen Shixiong about our new disciple.” With that, he steps onto his sword and flies off.

“Come along, Lun-er, I want you to meet my head disciple.” Mu Qingfang says. He pats the boy’s shoulder and leads him into the Healing Pavilion.

Wu Yanshin comes up the hall, spies Mu Qingfang with a child and stops in her tracks. “Shizun, what did you do? I thought you were going to town with Shen Shibo?”

“I did!” He defends himself. “This is Cheng Delun. He was assaulted in the street and his arm was broken. I healed the injury but my new friend here is quite malnourished and at high risk for a refracture if he uses his arm to bear any weight.” He smiles down at the boy. “Wu Shijie isn’t fussing at you,” he assures Cheng Delun, “She just likes to fuss at *me*.”

“Shijie, hmm?” Wu Yanshin says. “Hello, Cheng Shidi. It seems like Shizun has recruited you to be a disciple of Qian Cao peak when you’re ready. Do you want to learn healing?”

Cheng Delun nods. “Yes, Wu-jie. And Shen gege said I could go to his peak if I wanted to learn about music and strategy and stuff.”

Wu Yanshin’s eyebrows approach her hairline. “Shen Qingqiu said *that*?” She glanced over at Mu Qingfang who shrugs.

“Wherever Cheng Delun feels most comfortable,” Mu Qingfang says lightly. “Yanshin, can you help arrange for him to get a nice warm bath, some fresh clothes and a good meal?”

“Of course,” she says, like she’s offended he asked something so easy of her. “Come with me, Shidi,” She says with a friendly smile.

Cheng Delun waves once at Mu Qingfang. “Good bye, Mu gege! Thank you for everything!”

As they walk away, Wu Yanshin says to the child, “Oh, don’t worry, you’ll see Shizun soon enough, to serve him some tea when you’re all cleaned up."

Well. This day certainly turned out differently than he expected! Mu Qingfang leaves the healing pavilion and starts walking, lost in his thoughts. He delivered a baby!! He held a brand new person! That’s…that’s incredible, he thinks.

And the baby was so *small*. So precious. It makes Mu Qingfang think about how Yue Qingyuan mentioned that he raised Shen Qingqiu from an infant.

Wait-did someone *abandon* baby Shen Qingqiu?!?!? He stops in his tracks as this terrible thought ricochets through his brain. Somehow, Mu Qingfang hadn’t exactly internalized what that comment *meant*!

It would have been so *easy* for Shen Qingqiu to have *died* as a baby! Mu Qingfang feels sick at the thought. Then he has *another* terrible thought!

What if- what if Mu Qingfang *never met Shen Qingqiu at all*? That…that would be so *awful*!

He walks over the rainbow bridge, ignoring his surroundings completely until he happens to look up some minutes later, noticing that the disciple uniforms have changed. “When did I get to An Ding peak?”

A laugh from next to him. Mu Qingfang looks over to find Shang Qinghua grinning like a fool, keeping pace with him.

“Hey bro,” Shang Qinghua greets cheerfully. “Heard you had another date with Shen Shixiong.”

How does this fucker know everything? So annoying! “It wasn’t a date,” Mu Qingfang says shortly, walking faster, following the foot path.

“Uh huh,” Airplane says. “I also heard that you have a child together. How exciting! When are you moving in?”

Mu Qingfang has never wished for a fan more than he does right at this moment. He would dearly *love* to whack Airplane across the face with one! Instead he stops. Glances around. Since nobody’s within hearing distance, he hisses, “I can’t believe that you had his parents abandon him when he was a *baby*!”

“Whoa whoa!” Holding up his hands, Shang Qinghua protests, “Mu-xiong, it’s not like I thought any of this was *real*, come on.” He looks intensely at Mu Qingfang. “I’ve been *trying* to do what I can so he won’t get human sticked, but honestly, I think you and your wifebeam are doing way more on that account.”

Mu Qingfang blinks. “My…*what?*”

Laughing, Shang Qinghua nudges him with his shoulder. “Wife. Beam,” he enunciates, clearly having the time of his life. “Shen Qingqiu wouldn’t give the Original Goods the time of day, bro. You sweep in and start treating him like--” Airplane shakes his head. “I don’t even know! Like you’ve been waiting your entire *life* to meet him! Seriously, you probably don’t realize how you’re looking at him all the time.”

“Oh, do enlighten me, Great Master Airplane, *how* am I looking at Shen Qingqiu?” Mu Qingfang all but spits.

Shang Qinghua doesn’t take offense though. “Mu Xiong, be serious here. You look at Shen Qingqiu like you don’t want to take your eyes off him.” Airplane leans in, going for the kill. “And he looks at *you* the same way.”

Mu Qingfang opens his mouth. Then closes it again. He brings a hand up to his chest. Is. Is *that* what the anxious fluttering was about? The stomach churning anticipation? That warm curl of heat that unfurls whenever he sees Shen Qingqiu *smile* or heavens above, *laugh*. He thinks about the way his cheeks keep flushing and the waves of heat every time he spends any amount of time with Shen Qingqiu.

The way his hair oil smells.

The way he playfully swats Mu Qingfang with his fan.

“*Oh,*” Mu Qingfang whispers. He takes a deep breath. “Airplane, I-” He meets Shang Qinghua’s light brown eyes. “I really like him.”

Shang Qinghua huffs, crosses his arms over his chest, and grins. “Duh. We all know.”

“No, you-- Airplane, I’m not like the original goods, okay?” Mu Qingfang says, a little desperately.

Tilting his head to the side, Shang Qinghua sighs. “Okay. Calm down. Here’s what’s gonna happen. You, my friend in transmigration, are coming back to my place, and we’re having some drinks. And then you can tell Airplane Juju all your problems.”

Shang Qinghua slams a wine jar on the table, making Mu Qingfang jump. “For fucks sake,” he mutters.

“That one’s for you, Mu Shidi, or should I call you…Actually, what *should* I call you? Were you active on the PIDW forums?” Shang Qinghua sets his own jar down more gently and takes his seat across the table.

Mu Qingfang stretches his legs out under the table, slumping in his chair. “Peerless Cucumber.”

“OH MY GOD!” Shang Qinghua shouts gleefully. “STOP. IT. *You*? Cucumber bro, you’re killing me, I *wish* you had told me this earlier, *fuck*.” He taps his fingers on the table, drawing Mu Qingfang’s attention. “So. What’s stopping you from marrying Shen Shixiong and having his babies.”

“I literally hate you so much,” Shen Yuan snarls, lunging across the table.

Airplane yelps, and dives out of the way, landing on the floor. “So rude, Cucumber bro.” He brushes his robes off and gets back up on his chair. “Seriously though. For realsies. What’s the deal?”

Mu Qingfang makes a face. “I’m not *gay*.”

“Okay,” Shang Qinghua agrees. “You’re not gay.” He means forward. “But does it *really* matter that Shen Qingqiu is a man? Cause, I don’t know, like. I’m kind of getting the feeling that you don’t really want to jump his bones.”

“That’s because I *don’t*, “ Mu Qingfang says sourly.

“Uh huh.” Airplane looks skeptical. “Go ahead and open yours.” He peels the wax seal off his own jar of wine and takes a deep slug. Wiping his sleeve across his mouth, he says, “Would it be better if Shen Shixiong was a women?”

Mu Qingfang can’t stop the involuntary nose wrinkling from happening.

Shang Qinghua laughs at him. “You are such a cute little baby gay.” He leans over and pinches Mu Qingfang’s cheek. “Riddle me this, bro, if Shen Qingqiu kissed you, would you kiss him back?”

“Yeah, of course,” Mu Qingfang says, mystified. Even…even if he wasn’t really *sure* about it, he’d at least *try* it before rejecting Shen Qingqiu. Shen Shixiong has had a lot of rejection in his life, okay?! How is Mu Qingfang supposed to be able to do that?

“Sounds a little *gay*,” Shang Qinghua sing songs, and Mu Qingfang scowls, then flicks a burst of qi at him, zapping Shang Qinghua right in the shoulder. “Ow! Don’t be a dick, Mu Shidi,” Airplane says, rubbing his shoulder. “Use your mad medical skills for good instead of evil.”

“Just because I think kissing might be nicer than *fucking* someone-,” Mu Qingfang starts.

But Shang Qinghua interrupts. “Bro, is *that* the problem?” He rubs a hand over his face. Quietly he mutters, “Chronically online, but he doesn’t even know Ace people exist, fuck my life. Okay listen,” he says in a louder voice. “We’re going to show our work here.”

He pushes back his chair and retreats to another room, returning quickly with some rice paper and charcoal pencil. He draws a thick line down the center of the paper. He writes ‘Sexual’ on one side and ‘Romantic’ on the other.

“You ready, Cucumber bro? Airplane Laoshi has a lesson for you. See, sexual feelings are different from *romantic* feelings, but don’t worry, a lot of folks get these things confused.” He arches an eyebrow. “No questions yet?”

“I was waiting for you to explain,” Mu Qingfang says, jaw clenched.

“Okay, fine. So. I am being dead serious right now. Would you consider kissing Shen Shixiong?”

Crossing his arms over his chest defensively, Mu Qingfang says, “Yeah.”

“Good, so.” Airplane makes a checkmark under the Romantic heading. “What about holding hands?” At Mu Qingfang’s curt nod, Airplane makes another checkmark under Romantic. “Cool. What about maybe hugging? Snuggling?”

Mu Qingfang nods, face flaming. Airplane marks another check under Romantic.

“See? That wasn’t so terrible, right?” To his credit, Shang Qinghua actually seems like he’s trying to be encouraging. “Now, can you imagine yourself sleeping with someone?”

Wincing, Mu Qingfang says, “I don’t think so.”

Without comment, Shang Qinghua marks an X under the Sexual heading. “And…would you want someone to, ah, do stuff sexual stuff to you?”

Mu Qingfang wrinkles his nose and Shang Qinghua chuckles. “I take it that’s a no.” He marks another X under Sexual.

“So what I’m seeing is pretty common for people who are Ace. Well, Asexual. Meaning that romantic gestures are generally ok, but you may not particularly want sexy times.” Shang Qinghua bites his lip. “Just remember, this-*label*, is not like, written in permanent marker, okay? It’s like, a guideline? Sometime Ace people find that when they have a really close relationship with someone, they-”

“They might consider-” Mu Qingfang waves a hand, “all of that.” Has he heard this somewhere before? It feels kind of familiar now that he thinks about it. He closes his eyes and presses the tips of his fingers just above the bridge of his nose. “What am I supposed to do now,” he says, only having a minor crisis.

When he finally looks over at Shang Qinghua, the An Ding peak lord gives Mu Qingfang a strangely sympathetic expression. “Cucumber bro, it’s fine, you’ll see.” He smiles winningly. “Homophobia really isn’t a thing here.”

Peeling the wax from his wine jar, Mu Qingfang takes a drink. “That’s something, I guess.”

They both drink their wine in companionable silence. Then Shang Qinghua says, “Does this mean the marriage is back on?”

“Airplane!”

Chapter End Notes

I came very close to telling you all at the beginning that nobody dies in this chapter LOL. My poor readers were getting worried about Cheng Delun's headache in the last chapter-He's just hungry poor kid!

Bamboowraith, I literally took a screen shot of your post from the other day and used it to flesh out Airplane's chat with MQF here :)

Please enjoy this fluffy chapter cause shit's gonna hit the fan next time

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: Medical problems discussed-metastatic cancer, and abortion. At the end of the chapter MQF discusses dual cultivation as something OG Qingfang was forced into.

I don't have a good chapter title for this chapter and it's making me SAAADDDDD

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mu Qingfang does not have the emotional strength to deal with any fallout from his chat with Shang Qinghua. He decides that drinking and flying is just *fine* thank you, and goes the hell home.

The next morning, he's getting dressed, ready to face the day! When a qi message comes in from Qiong Ding peak, requesting Mu Qingfang to see the Sect Leader at his convenience. Snorting, Mu Qingfang thinks 'at his convenience' really means right the hell now.

Fine, whatever! He sends a quick message to Xie Yanmei, his partner in clinic today, finishes his cup of tea and then flies to Qiong Ding, resigned.

Yue Qingyuan's head disciple leads Mu Qingfang to the Sect Leaders office. Yue Zhangmen is already seated behind his desk. "Ah, Mu Shidi," he greets with a smile. "Please, sit." To the disciple he says, "Peng Fa, would you bring us a tea service please?"

Peng Fa, a rather forgettable looking young man, bows and retreats, presumably to carry out the request.

Mu Qingfang resists the urge to sigh, and looks at Yue Qingyuan expectantly.

"I understand you and Shen Shidi had an adventure yesterday?" Yue Qingyuan inquires gently.

Not in the mood for beating around the bush *or* getting a shovel talk which he's not sure he's ready for- Mu Qingfang says mildly, "Can Zhangmen Shixiong be more specific?"

Unfazed, Yue Qingyuan says, "Shen Shidi informed me that the two of you saved a young boy from…poor circumstances?"

"Yes?" Mu Qingfang really doesn't know where this is going.

“And that Shen Shidi took you to a brothel?” Yue Qingyuan presses.

Frowning, Mu Qingfang says a little sharply, “What *exactly* are you asking me?”

Blanching a little at the harsh tone, Yue Qingyuan tilts his head to the side. “I suppose I was wondering if you were planning on raising a complaint?”

“For what, saving someone’s life and delivering a baby?” Mu Qingfang is getting pissed now! “I am *sure* Zhangmen Shixiong is not suggesting that I should have let those two individuals *die*? Or be injured in front of me?” He’s really gathering steam, getting ready for a Peerless Cucumber style evisceration when Yue Qingyuan *laughs* and holds up a hand.

“Forgiveness, Mu Shidi,” Yue Qingyuan says, this time with a smile that looks more genuine. “I was attempting to discern if-”

“If I was going to run around accusing Shen Shixiong of being a terrible person who goes to brothels? I don’t care about that.” Mu Qingfang says, leaning forward and tapping on Yue Qingyuan’s desk. “What I *care* about are people that need medical care and *can’t access it*! I *care* about little boys who are so malnourished that I can’t even mend their bones well enough because their body simply does not have the nutrition to create new bone growth!” He leans back, crossing his arms over his chest. “And if Zhangmen Shixiong has a problem with me taking on a new disciple, then he can remove me as Peak Lord. Oh wait. You *can’t*.” Mu Qingfang can’t even look Yue Qingyuan in the eyes right now, he’s so annoyed.

“If you will excuse me, I have clinic.” And Mu Qingfang stands and storms out.

It’s still early enough that if he hurries, he can catch up with Xie Yanmei. As he flies, slowly Mu Qingfang calms down. He deliberately puts the interaction with the Sect Leader in the same mental box that he’s stuffed most of his life as Shen Yuan. Do not disturb!

Today’s clinic is in one of the closer towns, and he arrives at the location not long after Xie Yanmei starts setting up. Other senior and junior disciples of Qian Cao are busy preparing medical supplies. These kind of clinics, Mu Qingfang finds himself treating a lot of fulminant wounds. That is, long standing wounds that may not be healing for *other* reasons, perhaps because of poor perfusion. Some are a result of things like snakebites, or falls down mountainsides.

Interestingly, Mu Qingfang has yet to see a patient with diabetes, which is *great* because he doesn’t think he can invent insulin all on his own. He suffers the urge to knock wood and toss some salt over his left shoulder and forcibly puts that thought *right* out of his head! Shen Yuan was not a particularly superstitious person, but holy fuck, Mu Qingfang *is*.

All he has to do is *think* the word *Quiet* and all hell breaks loose. So, he’s a little afraid that he may have invoked an army of folks with diabetes just now. No! Nope, no, no! No more thinking about it!

Fortunately, folks are starting to trickle up. They’re just outside of the main part of the town with a large tent set up to block the sun.

“I’m going to start seeing patients,” Mu Qingfang tells Xie Yanmei who sighs.

“Okay, Shizun. Let me know if you need anything,” She continues unpacking Qiankun pouches at the back of the tent.

Mu Qingfang’s first patient is a teenage girl who looks about fifteen. She’s here with her mother, who looks on, grim faced. The girl tells him that she’s exhausted all the time, and has to pee a lot. Mu Qingfang immediately suspects where this is going. To the mother, he says, “Why don’t you wait with my disciple, over there, I need privacy to examine your daughter. Yanmei!”

Xie Yanmei, takes one look and asseses the situation correctly. “Please come with me,” She says kindly to the older woman. “I will get you some water, and a place to sit.”

Once they’re along, Mu Qingfang meets the young girls’s eyes. “May I scan your wrist?”

Hesitantly she holds it out, and with two fingers against her pulse, he sends his qi through her. He represses a sigh. As expected she’s pregnant. “I think you know what I’m going to tell you, is that correct?”

The teenage girl nods and looks down.

“Hey, it’s okay. I need to ask you some questions though, is that all right?”

“Yes,” She whispers.

“I’m not going to tell your mother anything we talk about unless your life is in danger.” MU Qingfang clarifies, and she visibly relaxes. “All right, what’s your name?”

“Wan Huian,” she answers softly.

“Very good,” Mu Qingfang smiles gently. “Wan Huian, you are pregnant. From my scan you are very, very early, in your pregnancy. Now. Do you *want* to carry this baby to term?”

Pressing her lips so tightly together they turn white, Wan Huian looks away, shaking her head.

“Okay, that’s fine,” Mu Qingfang says, “Thank you for being honest with me. Would you like some herbs to terminate this pregnancy?”

Her eyes glimmer and she nods.

“All right. I can do that.” Mu Qingfang digs through his own qiankun pouch where he keeps bundles of abortificant herbs ready for use. There’s actually several he can choose from, but he picks the one used most widely: snakegourd root. In this case, the roots are thinly sliced and then steeped into a tea which must be consumed thrice daily. After three days of this treatment, the pregnancy will end.

He reviews the instructions and makes her repeat them back. He gives her the herbs, and wishes her the best. He hopes everything works out okay for her.

After that Mu Qingfang treats an older man who has been passing blood in his urine. Mu Qingfang strongly suspects some type of bladder cancer, which he doesn't have a great way to treat. He's also concerned that the blood in his bladder will clot, making it impossible to pass urine and causing his kidneys to fail.

After a more in depth interview, Mu Qingfang discovers that three months ago, he started having shortness of breath with a productive cough. And that's when he realizes that 1-this patient definitely has cancer and 2-he's already got distant metastasis.

And he can't remove the tumors.

And he has no chemotherapy.

In short, Mu Qingfang is fucking *useless*.

He takes a deep breath and then explains to the man his suspicions-that he has a wasting disease, that's it's spread to his lungs, and may spread elsewhere.

"How much time do I have?" The man asks.

Mu Qingfang hesitates. "Possibly a year," he replies somberly.

The man nods, rubbing a palm over his face. He leaves without another word.

"Shizun?" Xie Yanmei says. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Yanmei," Mu Qingfang says distantly. "Let's see the next person."

He doesn't stay for the whole clinic today, per the agreement with Wu Yanshin. Once Mu Qingfang returns to the sect he retreats to his bedroom and sits on the bedside. After a few moments, his eyes snag on the hidden array.

He triggers it, and flashes through to the hidden room. Mu Qingfang pulls two sticks of incense from his sleeves. He sets them in the incense holder and then lights them with a spark of qi.

"Xuan Zhen," he murmurs, closing his eyes. "You were a healer. What do you do when you can't cure someone? How am I supposed to treat metastatic cancer? What good am I?"

Mu Qingfang concentrates on his breathing, and circulates his qi. He doesn't receive any magical answers, nor convenient visions. No god descends to pat him on the back.

Maybe, he thinks, we're just meant to muddle through the best we can. Also. He at least let the patient know that his time was limited, and thus, precious. Perhaps he'll be able to make whatever arrangements he needs to.

This line of thought isn't comforting in the least.

"Watch out for Xiang Xue," Mu Qingfang requests quietly. "Help him find his mother again in their next life." He purses his lips. "I'm not sorry about what I did."

He waits, but Xuan Zhen doesn't respond.

Since his mood is crap, Mu Qingfang wanders out to his garden. He passes by the Dragon's Flame Oleander, after checking on the containment arrays. The vine with the ant-filled peaches is overflowing with delicious looking fruit. It makes him chuckle a little.

Like, truly, what is the *point* of such a bizarre species?

The Creeping Blood bush rustles at him when Mu Qingfang walks past it. "I'm sorry," he tells it. "I didn't bring you any treats today. I'll try to remember to save you some meat after dinner, okay?" The prehensile vines arrange themselves into a corkscrew. It reminds him of the way a cat's tail will curve at the tip. "Good plant," he tells it, and wanders down the row.

The air chills as he approaches it, and the Snow Lion bush angles its branches in Mu Qingfang's direction. "Okay," he says, smiling a little, "Show me what you got." The bush rustles, and then shoots a wad of snow at him.

Mu Qingfang laughs. "You are such a silly plant. But honestly, you're pretty much my favorite."

The Snow Lion bush gives an all over shiver, and then throws more snow at Mu Qingfang. Yes. He really loves this thing.

When he returns to his house, he finds Liu Qingge waiting for him. Raising his eyebrows in surprise, Mu Qingfang says, "Liu Shixiong. Are you well? What can I help you with?"

Liu Qingge appears healthy enough, Mu Qingfang thinks. Dressed in his typical white and gray robes, hair in a ponytail which is high enough to look quite painful. And of course, he's *ridiculously* pretty. The Bai Zhan peak lord huffs a little. "Zhangmen Shixiong gave us a mission. He Luo Town is suffering a strange sickness, and we have been called to provide aid."

"What kind of sickness?" Mu Qingfang asks, and Liu Qingge pulls out a scroll from his sleeves and hands it over. According to the information Yue Qingyuan provided, several people have died after becoming infected with a laughing disease.

"*A laughing disease*?" Mu Qingfang says in disbelief.

Liu Qingge just looks at him grimly. "Keep reading," he says.

The first symptom appears to be uncontrollable laughter. From there, the patient develops an itchy maculopapular rash, which then develops into painful blisters if scratched. The manner of contagion is unknown.

"Who else is coming with us?" Mu Qingfangs asks Liu Qingge.

Curling his upper lip, Liu Qingge rolls his eyes. “Who else? Shen Qingqiu.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Mu Qingfang says thoughtfully. “He’s so well read and clever, that will be a big help.” He feels the weight of Liu Qingge’s glare. “What? I know you don’t get along, but even you can’t deny it.”

Liu Qingge straightens up. “What’s going on with you two? Are you *friends* now?” He says this like it’s completely impossible.

It’s kind of starting to piss Mu Qingfang off, actually. “Yes,” he says flatly, meeting Liu Shixiong’s steely gaze. “We *are*. Problem?”

Snorting, Liu Qingge says, “Better you than me.”

“That’s fine, then.” Mu Qingfang replies. “When are we supposed to leave?”

“As soon as you can get your people ready.” Liu Qingge states. “We will leave as a group from Qiong Ding peak.”

That seems like overkill, but all right. “I will go speak with my head disciple now. I should be ready within a couple of hours.”

“That long?” Liu Qingge seems dismayed.

Mu Qingfang gives him a long, even look.

Liu Qingge sighs. “*Fine*” He mounts Cheng Luan and takes off in the direction of Qiong Ding peak.

Of course, Xie Yanmei is still out at today’s clinic with several other senior disciples, fuck his life. He finds Wu Yanshin in her office in the Healing Pavilion and brings her up to speed. When she reads over the scroll her eyebrows arch higher and higher.

“Is this a joke, Shizun?” She looks serious.

“Not a joke, though the signs and symptoms are utterly ridiculous,” Mu Qingfang sighs. “It sounds like something you’d get from a demonic plant actually.”

Yanshin snorts. “Well, if you find one spitting snowballs at the locals, then you’ll know.”

“Hey!” Mu Qingfang says. “You know the Snow Lion bush is my favorite!”

Wu Yanshin taps two senior disciples, Wei Xiuying, and Sun Zhaohui to accompany them. They leave word that Xie Yanmei is in charge of the peak while Mu Qingfang and Wu Yanshin are out on a mission. Mu Qingfang sends a qi message out to Xie Yanmei to return back to the sect immediately.

Then they begin the difficult work of trying to anticipate any and all supplies that they may need. Mu Qingfang stuffs a qiankun pouch with several reference books, while the disciples pack all the medicine they can think might be useful.

Mu Qingfang reminds them to pack their own supplies, such as changes of clothes and personal items, as well as a waterskin or two.

Once everyone's ready, they fly over to Qiong Ding as a group. After they land, Mu Qingfang finds that Shen Qingqiu and two Qing Jing disciples are there, as is Liu Qingge and a few of his disciples. Yue Qingyuan is present, and seems to be chatting with Shen Qingqiu.

Was it only this very morning that Mu Qingfang had an argument with Zhangmen Shixiong? Well, at least he'll be off the mountain for a few days.

Shen Qingqiu finishes his conversation with Yue Qingyuan by rolling his eyes, and then turning his back and walking away. When he sees Mu Qingfang, Shen Qingqiu comes right over.

"Mu Shidi," he greets. "I certainly hope that you'll be able to figure out this infection so we can all return home as soon as possible." The corner of his lips curves up.

"Well, no pressure, then," Mu Qingfang says, a little nervously. "Besides, with Wu Yanshin around, I won't be getting into any trouble."

"You better not," Wu Yanshin says, just straight up popping in out of *nowhere*.

"Have you been taking lesson from Shen Shixiong on how to move silently or something?" Mu Qingfang says. "One day my heart's going to give out."

"I'm afraid I can't take credit for Wu Shizhi just being that talented," Shen Qingqiu comments, watching the sect leader speak with Liu Qingge.

That draws Mu Qingfang's attention as well. Liu Qingge looks like a kid getting scolded, and Yue Qingyuan is giving off 'let's all get along' vibes. Finally, after everyone has been briefed, they leave for He Luo town.

After everyone lands safely, they make for an inn to get settled. Mu Qingfang finds himself standing comfortably next to Shen Qingqiu while the Qing Jing peak lord takes command of getting enough rooms rented for the next several days.

Mu Qingfang explains that his disciples are not generally separated by gender, as they all work closely with each other and are pretty even tempered and pragmatic about bodily functions.

Shen Qingqiu doesn't like that, Mu Qingfang can tell by the way Shen Shixiong's expression tightens. Wu Yanshin offers to room with Wei Xiuying, and let Sun Zhaohui share a room

with the Qing Jing peak disciples.

That's three rooms, and Shen Qingqiu grits his teeth and arranges a room for Liu Qingge to share with his disciples.

Mu Qingfang doesn't trust the way that Wu Yanshin's eyes crinkle with amusement. He takes her aside and hisses, "What?"

She waves a hand, grinning. "Nothing, Shizun. I hope that you and Shen Shibo have fun rooming together." She gives him a beautific look and snags Wei Xuiying to get settled for the night.

"Rotten woman," Mu Qingfang mutters, while Shen Qingqiu finishes with the desk clerk.

"Mu Shidi, you're with me." Shen Qingqiu tells him, then finds Liu Qingge lingering by the door. "Liu Shidi, you and your disciples are sharing a room."

Liu Qingge looks like he *dearly* wants to make a snarky remark so Mu Qingfang says quickly, "Yes, thanking Shen Shixiong for handling the boring details. Shixiong, we should go try and get some rest so we can start early."

So Mu Qingfang follows Shen Qingqiu up the stairs and down the hallway to their room. It's quite large, and in fact has two separate sleeping areas. That's good. He doesn't want to make Shen Qingqiu uncomfortable.

"I heard you had an argument with Yue Qingyuan this morning," Shen Qingqiu says, out of the blue, closing the door behind him, and sticking a privacy ward on it for good measure.

Yes, that really happened only this morning. Goodness, it's been a long day, Mu Qingfang thinks. To Shen Qingqiu he says, "Zhangmen Shixiong was misinformed and called me all the way to his office to find out if I wanted to file a complaint against you." Mu Qingfang gets pissed off again just *thinking* about it.

But to his surprise, Shen Qingqiu quirks his lips a little, and then outright *grins*. "Oh, that *idiot*. I told him it wouldn't be an issue, so what does he do? Make it into one." Shen Shixiong waves a hand in the air, and then sits at the table in the middle of the shared area.

Frowning, Mu Qingfang takes a seat across from him. Their eyes meet over the table. "Was he trying to…?"

Sighing deeply, Shen Qingqiu looks annoyed. "Yes. Welcome to Qi-ge's particular brand of *caring* in which he has a knack for making things decidedly worse." His voice is waspish.

"Well, I suppose I won't feel too badly for yelling at him about it." Mu Qingfang says, a little sheepishly.

Shen Qingqiu sits up straight and looks oddly delighted. "You did?"

"Of course I did! He kept asking me such dumb questions, like, no, I *don't* want to file a complaint, what I want is for my patients to *not die*." He grimaces and looks down at the

table. “I hate when they do that.” Mu Qingfang shrugs. “Besides, it’s not like I’m Liu Qingge, come *on*.”

“No, I suppose a *Master* of *dual cultivation* wouldn’t have an issue with brothels.” Shen Qingqiu says, clasping his hands together on the table and eyeing him speculatively.

Mu Qingfang looks away. “I don’t…I’m not…” He presses his lips together, unable to meet Shen Qingqiu’s eyes. He has no idea how many people OG Qingfang slept with, but it must have been a lot, and to be fair, it seems like it wasn’t something that he actually wanted to *do*.

When he finally dares to look Shen Qingqiu in the eyes, he can’t bear to hold the eye contact. “My Shizun…I didn’t really…. It was a *treatment* and I wasn’t exactly *allowed* to withhold it from anyone that needed it.” Although it didn’t happen to Shen Yuan, he feels pretty terrible that OG Qingfang went through it.

A slow rolling killing intent rises from the other side of the table, and when Mu Qingfang looks up, Shen Qingqiu’s eyes are *blazing*.

“Are you telling me, that the last Qian Cao peak lord forced you to have sex with patients?” Shen Qingqiu’s voice is little above a whisper, but oh, it is *terrifying*.

“Yeah.” Mu Qingfang answers, feeling sick to his stomach.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: If that bastard wasn't dead already, I'd kill him.

Dear readers, forgive me! I thought this chapter was going to be more action packed, but then I had to write all the set up! *cries in worldbuilding*

Come tell me what you think! Your comments are keeping me aalliiivveee!!! *Hugs all of you tight*

I will work all my life for the development of the nation's medical expertise

Chapter Summary

Chapter Warnings: Canon typical violence, gross demonic beasts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For several long moments the repressive force of Shen Qingqiu's murderous intent fills the room, making it difficult to breathe. Then, he seems to gather himself and rein it back.

"It…was a long time ago," Mu Qingfang says quietly to the table. "And I try not to think about it, to be honest." He peeks over at Shen Shixiong, who looks like he's grinding his teeth. "One of the first things I did as Peak Lord was make the aphrodisiac response team strictly voluntary."

"You're a better person than I," Shen Qingqiu says tersely. "I probably would have burned down the entire peak."

Mu Qingfang laughs. Shen Qingqiu does not. His eyes are deadly serious. Mu Qingfang says, "I'm okay, Shixiong."

Glaring skeptically, Shen Qingqiu says, "Yes, it seems like that." He takes a deep breath and lets it out all at once. "Mu shidi should try to sleep. We will be busy tomorrow."

The next morning, Mu Qingfang, Wu Yanshin, and Shen Qingqiu begin their interviews. Thus far, they discover, five people have died from this 'laughing disease'.

"All right," Mu Qingfang begins, as they head to the first victim's home. "Five people dead. We should start by finding out first when the symptoms started, did they do anything out of the ordinary in the day or two preceding the onset of symptoms, did anyone close to or associated with them come down with the illness, and do the victims have anything in common-like a shared meal, or recently traveled together."

Shen Qingqiu remarks, with raised eyebrows, "Mu shidi sounds certain."

"In a way, it's similar to taking a patient's history," Mu Qingfang says. He marks off points using his fingers for emphasis. "Onset of symptoms, location of symptoms, duration of symptoms, aggravating or relieving factors and of course, treatment." He frowns. "Pay

special attention near the end of the interview, if the person mentions one last thing, that is often the most important point."

Wu Yanshin nods. "Yes, the 'doorway' question. Shizun, which people do you want to interview?"

"Definitely the family of the one who died *first*." Mu Qingfang frowns. "We should plan to meet directly after the interviews are concluded to compare." To Shen Qingqiu he says, "What is Liu Shixiong planning on doing today?"

Shen Qingqiu looks pleased with himself. "I have him scouring the town for more people with symptoms. Perhaps one of your disciples might go along?"

"I will take care of it, Shen Shibo." Wu Yanshin says, bowing, and heading back to the inn, apparently to coordinate.

"Well, Mu Shidi, let's go." Shen Qingqiu says.

Oh! Is he coming with? Mu Qingfang had thought they'd split up but this works too.

The first victim of the laughing disease was a street merchant, they discover. Xiao Han lived in a small house which was more like a two room shed, with his wife, Chang Liu. They had no children. Xiao Han, according to his wife, returned home after a usual day spent selling fresh vegetables from his cart.

The two had inherited a small piece of land nearby and used it to grow the produce which they sold. In addition to the garden, they kept a few cows which they used for milk as well as meat.

At this point, Shen Qingqiu speaks up for the first time during this process, asking, "Where exactly is your farm? We will need to take a look."

Oh, that's a good idea! Mu Qingfang's been so focused on the *people* he didn't think about the *places* that Xiao Han had been.

Chang Liu gives them directions to the farm, and it's not worth even flying there. It's just outside of the town itself, so the location was quite good. Mu Qingfang and Shen Qingqiu crest the top of a hill, and then they're looking at the modest farm.

The garden is fenced in, and appears to be thriving. All manner of vegetables are happily growing. To the left, there's a worn path through the grass leading to a humble looking barn. Inside it's dark and cramped, and there's a single cow in a stall with a small pile of dried grass to munch on.

"Does it strike you as odd that the cow is not outside?" Shen Qingqiu says. He frowns, a deep line appearing between his brows. "Unless it's been injured." He approaches the stall, and the cow seems mellow enough, so he lets himself in, and peers at her critically.

"Mu Shidi, can you hold a light over here?"

“Of course,” Mu Qingfang says, gathering qi into his palm and holding it up, illuminating the stall.

Shen Qingqiu keeps a hand on the animal’s back as he moves around it. While he’s doing that, Mu Qingfang peers over, eyeing the cow critically.

“I wonder if…” Mu Qingfang. “Shen Shixiong, I’m going to try scanning her, so you’ll lose your light.”

“All right,” Shen Qingqiu says, stepping closer to the stall door and removing his hand from the cow.

Carefully, Mu Qingfang sends his energy through the cow, scanning as lightly as he can. He doesn’t want to cause her any distress. “Shixiong, check behind her ears, high up on her neck. I think she’s been injured.”

Shen Qingqiu moves cautiously up toward her head. “Easy, pretty girl,” he murmurs, and Mu Qingfang’s heart skips a few beats. Shen Qingqiu leans in, eyes narrowed. “Here,” he says. “She has puncture marks and some torn skin.”

“Interesting,” Mu Qingfang says, as Shen Qingqiu lets himself out of the stall.

“What is?” Shen Shixiong demands, brushing dust from his robes.

Hesitating, Mu Qingfang says, “I have a theory, but I don’t want to influence you in case you come up with something, this way we have a better shot of getting leads.”

Huffing a little, Shen Qingqiu says, “Are you sure this isn’t you wanting to be mysterious?”

That startles a laugh from Mu Qingfang. “*Me*? Mysterious? I don’t think so.”

“Do you truly not see it?” Shen Qingqiu’s tone, curious, but--something else too, draws Mu Qingfang’s attention.

Shaking his head, Mu Qingfang decides that Shen Shixiong is just being silly. “I don’t,” he teases. “Shixiong will have to enlighten this worthless Shidi.”

Shen Qingqiu’s gaze turns evaluating. “When all this is finished, perhaps.”

Mu Qingfang smiles. “I will look forward to it.”

The next person they talk to is the sister of a young woman who died. Zhang Changying tells them that the victim, her younger sister Zhang Lifen, worked as a seamstress for one of the few families with money nearby.

Zhang Changying shows them into her small home. Shen Qingqiu and Mu Qingfang sit down on the small couch. She offers them tea, but Mu Qingfang smiles winningly and says, “Forgiveness, but we must decline due to the nature of the investigation.”

Zhang Lifen worked out of the home which they shared, and developed symptoms before she retired for the night. Zhang Changying tells them, “All night she laughed and laughed. But it didn’t sound happy. The next morning the laughing was gone, and I’m not surprised because all of her skin was covered in a horrible rash.”

Mu Qingfang leans forward. “I’m told that the rash was raised, red and itchy, is that correct?”

“Yes, Immortal Master. Lifen-mei-” Zhang Changying presses her lips together, obviously attempting to maintain composure- “She scratched so much that her arms and legs were in ribbons, and then…” Her shoulders begin shaking. “Her *eyes*...”

Mu Qingfang exchanges an intense look with Shen Qingqiu.

Softly, Shen Qingqiu asks, “Madam Zhang. Do you happen to recall what you and your sister ate for dinner the night her symptoms started? Did you both have the same meal?” He reaches over and passes her a white handkerchief from his sleeves.

Gratefully, Zhang Chengying wipes her face. She frowns and after a moment says, “I made some rice and steamed vegetables. Lifen-mei had a small portion, but she-she was in the mood for something sweet. Earlier in the day she had purchased some ginger-milk pudding.”

“Where did she get it from, do you know?” Mu Qingfang has a *bad* feeling about this.

Meeting his eyes, Zhang Chengying says, “She bought it from a street vendor. The man that sells fresh vegetables.”

Once outside, Mu Qingfang says, “Shixiong, do you recall-what happened to the bodies of the victims?”

“They burned them.” Shen Qingqiu says.

Oh. Well. It’s a good thing Mu Qingfang forgot to start with the bodies first. Rookie move, he tells himself, then thinks, wait a second, this is actually my first murder mystery! Maybe he’s not doing that terrible at it. Surely Shen Shixiong would have said something, right?

The third family they interview is the *worst*. Two grieving parents who just lost their infant baby. Thankfully, Shen Shixiong takes the lead on this one, like he senses that Mu Qingfang just…*can’t*.

The couple explains that the wife was quite ill after giving birth, and her milk supply was insufficient to provide for the baby’s needs. She explains haltingly that she tried so hard, and it was so painful and frustrating. They couldn’t find any nearby nursing mothers to help. So they resorted to buying milk from a local farmer who had some cows.

Which farmer? Why the one up the street that sells fresh produce.

Mu Qingfang’s mind is a stream of *FUCK. FUCK. FUCK. FUCK*. A *baby*. Nope! No! Mu Qingfang *refuses* to think about this! He mechanically says goodbye and gives his deepest sympathies.

He descends the steps from the house to the street level and starts walking. His throat feels like there's a great lump in it, and his eyes hurt.

He-he's definitely going to lose it, he can feel it coming. Everything he's been pushing down, and pushing down-

the little baby, the man with cancer, the teenager that shouldn't be pregnant, Xiang Xue, the feel of his chest as his heart stopped under Mu Qingfang's hand, the little kids with their toes frozen off, the old woman with heart failure

WHY IS HE ALWAYS TOO LATE?!

Mu Qingfang turns into an alley between buildings. He lays one hand on the brick wall, and leans over, the heel of his other hand on his forehead.

Shen Yuan wants nothing more than to cry for his mother, to hold her one more time, to say goodbye to Meimei, to tease Da-ge and Er-ge, but he can't, even in death he was such a fucking failure-

"Shidi."

Mu Qingfang ignores him. His shoulders start shaking uncontrollably and he holds his breath so he doesn't just start fucking *sobbing* Maybe Shen Qingqiu will walk away and forget he saw Mu Qingfang breaking down completely, like a loser. Maybe he-

"Mu Shidi, you have to *breathe*," Shen Qingqiu says, from way too close.

Mu Qingfang lets go of the wall and covers his face completely, still trying to hold back in all the sobs, all the tears he's stuffed down, until it all got too much. Okay, he thinks, I can do this-

Then Shen Qingqiu *wraps his arms* around Mu Qingfang's shoulders holding him *tight*, with one hand in his hair and the other pressed against his back. "Breathe, Shidi, *please*-"

"I-I can't stop," Mu Qingfang says, and loses it completely. He hides his face in Shen Shixiong's neck and just cries. He cries for his patients, all the tears he's been holding in for months, cries for Shen Shixiong, abandoned as a baby and then misunderstood his entire life. He cries for OG Qingfang who was coerced into sex he didn't want, but had to provide.

He cries for Shen Yuan, hiding in someone else's skin, and will never *ever* hear his own name ever again…

Through it all, Shen Qingqiu is solid and reassuring, like the great stone of a mountain while the rain whips against it. "I have you…I have you…" Shen Qingqiu murmurs into his ear, while Mu Qingfang holds on desperately.

When Mu Qingfang's heart is finally dry, embarrassment sinks in and he wants to run away and never be perceived again in his life. Shen Qingqiu shows no signs of wanting to be un-hugged, so Mu Qingfang decides he might as well enjoy the closeness. "Shixiong," he manages though his throat still feels thick and tight.

“Mn.” Shen Qingqiu’s hand strokes over his hair.

That feels. Way too comforting. Okay. He can do this. Mu Qingfang loosens his arms from their death grip around Shen Qingqiu’s neck and shoulders. And then he’s looking up at Shen Shixiong from ~~kissing distance~~ close enough that he can see the dark flecks of green in his eyes, and every single individual lash.

Unable to meet his eyes, Mu Qingfang can’t help hunching.

“Better now?” Shen Qingqiu asks quietly. One of his hands lingers at the small of Mu Qingfang’s back.

“Sorry, Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang says, chewing on his lower lip.

Shen Qingqiu sighs. “I didn’t ask for apologies, Shidi. So don’t give me any.” His tone lightens. “You know the rules.” He shakes a closed fan in Mu Qingfang’s direction.

When he finally dares to look Shen Qingqiu in the eyes, Mu Qingfang discovers that his Shixiong doesn’t seem upset in the least to have been used as a teddy bear. “You, ah. If word gets out that Shen Shixiong is so good at hugging, you’ll have a line wrapped around the block.”

Abruptly realizing he must look a mess, Mu Qingfang frantically swipes at his face. Shen Shixiong looks away while he cleans the worst of the snot and tears. God, so embarrassing. But. He steals a glance at Shen Qingqiu. Shen Shixiong, he’s really….really quite…

Wonderful.

“It’s a Grey Tiger Lovebird,” Liu Qingge states flatly, throwing the dead beast on the ground.

Shen Qingqiu’s upper lip curls. “Perhaps Shidi should *refrain* from dumping dangerous beasts right in front of *the Inn we’re staying at*.” He nudges the corpse with the toe of his boot. “Tell us about this beast, Liu Shidi.”

Mu Qingfang can’t help staring at it in surprise. He doesn’t really remember something like this in PIDW.

Liu Qingge huffs, crossing his large arms over his equally large chest. “As you see, it has the body of a tiger with the face and beak of a demonic lovebird.” He produces his sword and uses the tip to turn the head to the side, exposing a grey stripe under the chin. “The non-demonic lovebirds don't have this marking. Also,” Liu Qingge adds, “This particular beast is known for its venom which-” he frowns. “It’s weird, because they usually only attack livestock. I’ve actually never heard of one attacking a human, let alone multiple humans.”

“It *did* attack livestock,” Shen Qingqiu tells him. “A cow, specifically.”

“Then how-” Liu Qingge starts.

“The milk,” Mu Qingfang says dully. “The farmer drank the milk. The girl used it in her pudding, and the baby…” He swallows his grief down.

“That’s not right,” Liu Qingge says. “It just- it doesn’t *do* that. The venom *paralyzes* it’s prey, it doesn’t…*mutilate them, it doesn’t make them go crazy.”*

Mu Qingfang furrows his brows. What kind of poison would cause the effects that they saw on the victims? Uncontrolled laughter, followed by a distinct rash so severe that the patient dies within a day or two of contracting it.

“We forgot to ask something important, Mu Shidi,” Shen Qingqiu says suddenly. Their eyes meet. “We forgot to find out what they were *feeding* it.”

“Shizun!” A voice calls, and all three peak lords turn as one.

Wu Yanshin trots across the street. “Shizun, I think it’s linked to some milk-”

“Clever girl,” Shen Qingqiu says approvingly. “Yes, we know.” He turns to Mu Qingfang. “Mu shidi, we should return to the farmer’s house at once.”

They cloak themselves using attention diverting talismans. The fields remain empty except for the growing vegetables. Shen Qingqiu forms an array from hand seals and sends it sweeping out in a radius around them. “Checking for demonic energy,” he says. Frowning, Shen Qingqiu swivels his head back and forth. “Hm. Interesting. Mu Shidi, do you find it *odd* that a single cow is apparently providing enough milk to sell to so many people?”

How is he supposed to know, Shen Shixiong? Shen Yuan didn’t exactly grow up on a dairy farm! “It does seem strange,” Mu Qingfang says, after a moment. “Maybe let’s try the barn itself.”

“Yes, good idea.” Shen Qingqiu agrees and they walk over there. Shen Qingqiu pushes the barn door open. “Mu Shidi, stay alert,” he cautions.

Mu Qingfang mentally prepares himself to use his needles if need be. He holds up a palmful of qi to light the area while Shen Qingqiu creates the array again. *This time* a dark miasma appears in the air, swirling and dangerous looking. And it’s centered right over the cow. “When is a cow not a cow?” He mutters out loud.

Shen Qingqiu pulls his sword out of thin air. “When it’s a demon masquerading as one,” he says grimly. He raises his sword, and strikes down in one powerful blast, breaking the hidden concealment array.

“What the *fuck* is *that*!” Mu Qingfang says, appalled.

The thing in the stall looks like a cow and a spider somehow *melted* into each other. Eight horrifying legs emerge from the body of a cow. Instead of a cow's head, it's that of an arachnoid, and it's many red eyes immediately fix on Shen Qingqiu.

"Watch out," Mu Qingfang says, as the spider-cow spits a stream of poison at Shen Qingqiu. Shen Qingqiu flips lightly into the air, dodging the spray. Mu Qingfang pulls an emergency talisman and sets it off. It shoots straight up, breaking through the roof of the barn and flying high into the air where it explodes in the dark green and blue colors of Qian Cao peak.

The Spider-cow braces the lower half of its body and then strikes out with two pairs of legs. The stall collapses with the concussive force sending wooden splinters and fragments blasting outward in all directions.

Shen Qingqiu flash steps to Mu Qingfang, wrapping an arm around him and pulling him into Shen Qingqiu's body. He strikes with his sword, the glare nearly blinding as it disintegrates the stall remnants.

Now freed from the stall, the Spider-cow stands up on it's eight legs, and wow, fuck that thing is disgusting and also *huge*. It hisses threateningly at Shen Qingqiu, and he shoves Mu Qingfang away using his qi.

Mu Qingfang lands *hard*. He ignores the pain in his shoulder and back, calling restorative qi to that area and reinforcing his body. He's not a brute from Bai Zhan, but he knows the theory well enough. After all, OG Qingfang documented it clearly.

Shen Qingqiu uses a combination of sword strikes and talisman to battle the Spider cow, but while he is quite formidable, this thing is also very, very *pissed*.

Mu Qingfang manifests qi needles and shoots them at the Spider cow, meaning to put out it's eyes. It turns its head at the last second, and the needles bounce harmlessly off the hard exoskeleton on its head. "Where the hell is Liu Qingge?!"

"Late as usual," Shen Qingqiu snarls, blocking another blast of poison from the Spider-cow's maw. He's watching the monster closely, keeping his eyes trained on it, when his head snaps around in alarm.

Mu Qingfang catches a glimpse of something shiny in the air and flashsteps instinctively. Whatever it was bounces off his shoulder. When he lowers his arm, Chang Liu stands there. In her hands she has another knife. She flips it in her hand.

Shen Qingqiu redoubles his efforts against the Spider cow, sending talisman after talisman at it. It shrugs them off then rears back on it's four hind legs. It then jumps forward, making Shen Qingqiu leap into the air where it's more difficult for him to attack.

"Forgiveness Immortal Masters," Chang Liu says in a voice that's demure and sweet. "We truly did not mean any harm. We just wanted to make a living."

"By feeding people milk from a *demonic beast?" Shen Qingiu says contemptuously. "Ridiculous," he scoffs, spinning his sword and sending a blast at the Spider cow.*

By now the barn is in imminent danger of collapsing. It wasn't a well built structure to begin with and with the destruction of the concealment array, the integrity of the building is quickly failing, especially with Shen Shixiong blasting his sword everywhere.

Mu Qingfang feels a wave of heat sweep over him, and ignores it. He opens his mouth to say something but the ceiling implodes inward. Mu Qingfang goes down when a chunk of the roof lands right on his legs. A falling rafter knocks Shen Qingqiu right out of the air, trapping him under the Spider Cow.

A pile of rubble shakes and then explodes dramatically as Liu Qingge rises from the debris.

"Lui Qingge! Shen Qingqiu is trapped under it! Please!" Mu Qingfang screams. He twists his body so he can see Chang Liu, and sends needles at her. Although she tries to block them, Mu Qingfang's needles strike true, and render her paralyzed.

Mu Qingfang gathers his qi and uses it to forcefully shove the pile of wood off his body. He doesn't have any major injuries since he reinforced his body earlier. But he's weirdly dizzy, and he gets that flash of heat again.

Blinking rapidly, he tries to get to his feet. The Spider Cow screams and two of the legs on the same side are removed by Cheng Luan. Liu Qingge uses a brute force blast of qi from his hand and knocks the thing back. While it's half on it's back, Liu Qingge calls, "Shen Qingqiu!" The dust is thick, and Mu Qingfang has no idea if Shen Qingqiu is even conscious.

"Shen Qingqiu!" Liu Qingge calls again. The War God looks up, just as the Spider Cow spits a stream of poison at him and dodges it, landing on the ground and rolling away.

Finally on his feet, Mu Qingfang pulls more needles from his sleeve. These are dipped in paralyzing agents, so will be effective no matter where he strikes. But he can't hit either one of his fellow peak lords, lest he kill them inadvertently.

He swallows. His mouth is filled with saliva and his head is killing him. He uses his right arm to wipe sweat away from his forehead, and for a moment stares at the bright red stain on his sleeve.

Where the fuck did that come from?

"Shizun!"

Mu Qingfang's head turns. That's Wu Yanshin! "Yanshin, stay back-" he warns.

Instead of listening, his disciple steps over the prone body of Chang Liu. "Yanshin, Shen Shixiong is trapped under that thing!"

"It's okay, Shizun, Liu Shibo has him." Wu Yanshin picks up his wrist, scans him, and her face tightens. "We need to get you out of here immediately."

Mu Qingfang shakes his head desperately. "No, no, Shen Qingqiu-he's, *I can't leave him!*" The air is nothing but dust, and the screams of the monster seem far away. "Why does my head hurt?" He wonders out loud.

“Because you’re an idiot who got poisoned,” Wu Yanshin says, laying her hand over his right shoulder and trying to close the wound.

“What’s. What’s wrong with my shoulder?” Mu Qingfang says stupidly, “That doesn’t even hurt.”
“Not sure,” Wu Yanshin says. “Okay, Shizun, get ready, time to get out of here.” She flexes her qi, and then they’re both standing. Well, he’s at least on his feet, but he’s leaning pretty heavily on her. “Wei Xuiying!” She calls. “We need your help!”

Wei Xuiying appears like magic to throw her body under Mu Qingfang’s left side, supporting him. Together, his two disciples help him get free from the demolished barn.

Outside where the air is clearer, Liu Qingge’s powerful sword glare is obvious, though now he’s quite a distance away.

“Shen Shixiong? Where is he?” Mu Qingfang demands. “Shixiong!”

“Damn it, Shizun, stop squirming around.” Wu Yanshin says harshly. “You are a *terrible* patient. Sun Zhaohui is taking care of him. I promise, Shen Shibo is all right. You should worry about *yourself* you stupid man.”

Mu Qingfang’s entire body is starting to feel like it’s on fire. “Why is it so *hot*?” he croaks.

Wu Yanshin and Wei Xuiying exchange glances. Together they gently lay Mu Qingfang on the ground. Wu Yanshin says, “Xuiying, go tell Shen Shibo that we’re going to need his help. Explain that Shizun is confused, okay? Tell him to come *now*.”

“Shen Qingqiu-he’s all right? He’s…it trapped him…” Mu Qingfang feels weird. Why is he so weak?

“Because you got stabbed with a poisoned knife,” Wu Yanshin says, then adds more gently, “Shen Shibo is okay, Shizun, he’s just a little tired.”

He manages to meet her eyes. “Promise? You can leave me, I’m fine, just make sure that he knows, *I didn’t leave him.*” Mu Qingfang blinks slowly. The world around him starts spinning and he can’t keep his eyes open.

“Shizun, listen to me,” Wu Yanshin says from far away. “----needs to treat you----------consented-----have to let him---------the poison.”

His body feels like it’s melting, this feels terrible. Then a cool hand touches his face. “I have you, Mu Shidi,” someone says. The world moves around him, and the wind whips his hair into his face.

When awareness returns, Shen Qingqiu’s face is very close to his. “You’re all right,” Mu Qingfang says in relief, and cups Shen Shixiong’s cheek in his hand. “Shen Qingqiu, I thought you-” His voice catches. “I thought you-” he can’t say it.

Shen Qingqiu covers the hand that Mu Qingfang’s holding to his cheek. Then he turns his head and presses a kiss to the palm of Mu Qingfang’s hand. “Do you understand, Shidi?”

“I-You-” Mu Qingfang stammers. His entire consciousness is dwindling down to heat and flames, burning him from the inside out.

“Qingfang, *listen* to me. You’ve been poisoned, and you require dual cultivation,” Shen Qingqiu says urgently, staring down into his eyes, from where he’s laying half on top of him. “Wu Shizhi has the form you filled out, naming me your proxy, in case such an event occurred.”

Shen Yuan doesn’t understand what’s happening. There’s a very pretty stranger very close to him. But everywhere the stranger touches him, it brings blissful cooling to his overheated body. “I don’t…who is…Qingfang?”

The man on top of him stares down in dismay. He closes his eyes. When he opens them they’re filled with determination. “What’s your name?” the stranger says, “What should I call you?”

Blinking rapidly, Shen Yuan says, “Yuan. Shen Yuan.”

Chapter End Notes

Whew! Holy ~~cow~~ crap this was intense!! I hate hate hate writing action-y type scenes, so I'm not sure how well this came out.

SQQ: Holds MQF while he has a breakdown
SQQ: protects from crazy Spider Cows!
SQQ: Kisses MQF's hand. Shidi, do you understand?

SY: pretty stranger says what now?

Come tell me what you think!! I am dying to know!!!

I will heal the wounded

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: Feels kinda Dub Conny but there is explicit consent. Consent is sexy! Sexy times in this chapter! Lots of soft fluffiness!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Shen Yuan," the very pretty man says intensely. "I need you to listen carefully. You've been poisoned, and you need treatment with dual cultivation."

Blinking stupidly, the very pretty man doubles and triples in Shen Yuan's vision. He knows this man, knows him well, but his name is stuck on the tip of his tongue. Blearily, Shen Yuan closes his eyes, but the pretty man shakes him.

"No! You can't sleep yet! Shen Yuan, I need an answer. Can I treat you?" The pretty man's eyes bore into him. He strokes Shen Yuan's cheek with a cool thumb.

Shen Yuan feels like his insides are liquifying. His veins feel like molten lava. Surely whatever this pretty man wants to do to him can't be as bad? Also….Shen Yuan blinks, then blinks again, trying to focus. Something tells him….he can trust this man.

"Okay," Shen Yuan croaks, and the pretty man closes his eyes in relief.

"Thank the gods," the pretty man mutters. "I'm going to take your robes off," he says. "We need to do this quickly, and I'm sorry. I wish-" His expression turns grim. "Next time, maybe."

The pretty man produces a knife from somewhere and just slices the robes right off Shen Yuan's body. He should probably feel weirder about being naked in front of someone for the first time, but…it's such a relief to have his skin exposed to the air.

The pretty man gets off the bed for a moment, and Shen Yuan can't help reaching out a hand. "Don't go, come back, *please*-"

"Shixiong is right here, A-Yuan." The man (Shixiong?) says. "Be at ease-I need to get some-" The pretty man murmurs something inexplicable about emergency medical pouches or something, but it's fine, because he climbs back on the bed and starts touching Shen Yuan again.

Shen Yuan really expected to feel a lot more stress about his first time. Instead he's filled with blissful lassitude. His pretty Shixiong will definitely take care of things. "So reliable,"

he says, and Shixiong snorts.

He starts by laying his entire body over Shen Yuan's. Everywhere Shixiong touches brings cool, crisp relief. Shen Yuan hooks his arms over Shixiong's neck.

"Mmn. Your hair is so silky," Shen Yuan tells him, running his hands through it. The fire in his veins feels a little bit more stable with the cool length of his pretty Shixiong over him. Shen Yuan bends his leg and rests his foot on Shixiong's lovely ass.

"You-" Shixiong shakes his head while his lips curve up. "Shidi-do you want…can I-?" He blatantly looks at Shen Yuan's lips, then back up to meet his eyes.

"That's a good idea," Shen Yuan says immediately. "Shixiong is so smart!" He tilts his head up invitingly.

As soon as Shixiong's lips touch Shen Yuan's, he feels *so* much better! He closes his eyes, pressing his lips more firmly against his pretty Shixiong. Shixiong obviously knows what he's doing, because he licks into Shen Yuan's mouth!

Shen Yuan's body responds completely instinctively and the next thing he knows, it's *Shixiong* that's moaning into *his* mouth. Ha. That's *awesome*. Shen Yuan has no idea how he became like-a sex god or whatever!

He tightens his grip around Shixiong's neck, dragging him closer. Every time their slick tongues meet, a rush of cool, crisp qi flows into him. Oh, it feels so good! Except Shen Yuan is getting hot again, he feels like if he was looking down at himself he might see distortion in the air from the waves of heat coming off his body.

"More," he says urgently. "Pretty Shixiong, *please*, I need you to- I *need*-"
He doesn't know what the fuck he needs, honestly, he just knows that *Shixiong* is the only one he wants it from. He kisses Shixiong's face, his lips, his cheeks. He nibbles on his sharp jaw, and then just under his ear. Shixiong pants harshly against him while Shen Yuan sucks on his neck.

Shen Yuan moves without really thinking and then-*oh*, what's *that*, he thinks in delight! Shixiong is *hard* and pressed right up against Shen Yuan's aching erection. He grinds them together and Shixiong gasps, then clutches his shoulders.

"Yes, like that," Shen Yuan says, pleasure arcing along his nerves like electricity. "Shixiong, I need--I need you--"

Shixiong takes several deep breaths, and when he sits up, his glorious hair is all mussed and his gigantic hair piece is askew.

"Oh my god, you are so adorable," Shen Yuan says. "Your poor hair!"

Shixiong looks exasperated for some reason. He runs a palm over his face. "Turns out your reputation was correct," he mutters.

“Oh? What reputation?” Shen Yuan asks happily. Now that Shixiong has been kissing him, and passing him qi, he feels so much better. Like he might not burn himself alive after all! It’s great!

“Shidi has much more experience at this than I do,” Shixiong tells him, with a frown. “I-don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” Shen Yuan says emphatically. “I know you won’t.”

Looking dubious, Shixiong nods. “Can you part your legs?”

Eagerly, Shen Yuan spreads his knees apart. His eyes linger on Shixiong’s naked form. “Oh, yes, you’re right. We need oil,” he adds, the words bubbling up from somewhere in his brain.

“Bossy,” Shixiong mutters. He opens his hand and a bottle flies from the pile of robes on the floor, up through the air, landing in his palm with a *smack*!

“Do you know what to do now?” Shen Yuan says, watching Shixiong tip some oil onto his fingers. “Because-”

He shuts up because Shixiong leans down and kisses him! That’s much better than talking, holy crap. Shen Yuan slides his tongue right against Shixiong’s. He wants to hear his pretty Shixiong make those noises from his throat again. He’s plotting how to do that when slick fingers press gently between his legs.

Oh! Oh! He’d forgotten about that! He holds Shixiong’s face gently in his hands, and keeps kissing him. Long fingers carefully stretch him open, and Shen Yuan remembers that he’s actually burning up! He breaks the kiss to say, “Oooh, curl your fingers, that’s it, now *press* when you slide them out-ahhhh” Shen Yuan arches his back, lost. Fuck! That feels so *good*!

“Shixiong, *yes*, my god, just like that, don’t stop, don’t-”

A cool hand on his burning stomach. A head full of dark hair dipping down, engulfing him in moist heat, silken tongue flickering over the head of his-

“Shixiong, I’m-”

“Not yet,” Shixiong says, gripping his base tight.

That’s not fair!! Shen Yuan was so close!! “Shi-xiong!” He whines. Then whines again, when Shixiong slips two fingers in and presses them against his walls, stretching him open. Shen Yuan pulls his leg back, and wow! How did he get this flexible? He could probably do a full split!

“That’s going to have to be good enough,” Pretty Shixiong says, “because you’re determined to drive me *insane*-”

Shen Yuan feels something large and blunt at his entrance. He helpfully bears down, and then, and *then*--

A river of cool, refreshing qi spills into his meridians, flowing freely, cooling everywhere he's *burning*. Over and over, Shixiong presses in, then flexes his hips, grinding them together.

He grabs Shen Shixiong round his neck, pulling him in for kisses. "Shixiong….Shixiong…" Shen Yuan can't shut up, can't stop saying his name…Oh! He knows his name!

"Shen Qingqiu! Yes! I remember! God, you feel so good, so good," Shen Yuan babbles helplessly, all the while that cool river of qi flows *everywhere* washing away all the pain, all the burning lava in his meridians. He wraps his legs around Shen Shixiong's hips, pulling him in deeper.

But Shen Qingqiu slows down until they're nose to nose, breathing the same air. "A-Yuan," he says, looking deeply into Shen Yuan's eyes. He waits, he's waiting-for what?

"Don't *stop*," Shen Yuan complains, "What is wrong with you-are you okay? Wait, do *you* need to stop, because we can probably do that-"

Shen Qingqiu's face breaks into a smile, wide and happy. "Just checking," he says tenderly, brushing a thumb over Shen Yuan's cheek. "Just making sure that *you* still wanted this."

"If it's *you* it's…" Mu Qingfang smiles. "If it's Shen Shixiong, then it's *wonderful*."

"Are you in your right mind again?" Shen Qingqiu asks, still not moving.

"Am I-*YES*, for fucks sake, if you don't start moving," Mu Qingfang says.

Shen Qingqiu arches an eyebrow. And doesn't fucking move. So, Mu Qingfang flips them right over, and threads their fingers together over Shen Qingqiu's head.

"Go ahead," Shen Qingqiu says. Then he adds, "A-Yuan should take what he wants."

Mu Qingfang flushes deeply. He leans forward and starts moving slowly. "Shixiong- again, *please*?"

"A-Yuan." Shen Qingqiu says, holding eye contact. Then he presses his feet against the bed and snaps his hips up, pulling a cry from Mu Qingfang. Shen Qingqiu shakes his hands free and reaches up, tugging Mu Qingfang down so he's laying right on top of him. He brushes his lips against Mu Qingfang's ear and whispers, "Call me A-Jiu. Only you. Only when we're like *this*." He snaps his hips again, and Mu Qingfang cries out. Shen Qingqiu reaches between them and starts stroking Mu Qingfang's straining length.

"A-Jiu, *please*, don't stop, don't stop,-" Mu Qingfang chants with each thrust. His orgasm hits like a freight train, unstoppable, "A-Jiu!"

Shen Qingqiu arches his neck, eyes squeezed close as he comes, and the last lingering poison dissipates harmlessly. Mu Qingfang collapses on top of Shen Qingqiu, breathing hard. Carefully, Shen Qingqiu eases them to the side.

Mu Qingfang's mind, free of the poison, is suddenly all too clear. At once, he's aware of every inch of his naked body, still pressed against Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Qingqiu that he *shamelessly* teased and begged to fuck him please.

Shen Qingqiu that he demanded use his *other*, much more personal name.

Mu Qingfang's breath stops in his chest as he realizes.

Shen Qingqiu who requested Mu Qingfang call him by *his* own, very personal name.

"Breathe please, A-Yuan," Shen Qingqiu's voice is close to his ear, and the arm wrapped around Mu Qingfang's waist tightens. "Are you…having any regrets?" He asks carefully.

"No!" Mu Qingfang exclaims. "No, A-Jiu, you-I just….for me…" He hides his face in the curve of Shen Qingqiu's neck. This is a good place to hide, he thinks. Maybe he'll just stay here forever. "For me, this was the first time."

Shen Qingqiu goes still. "What do you mean?"

"I wanted to tell you," Mu Qingfang says, fingers splayed on Shen Qingqiu's pale chest. "So many times. But I was…" he sighs. "Scared," he says more quietly. "Shen Qingqiu. I wasn't always Mu Qingfang."

Warm fingers close over Mu Qingfang's hand. Shen Qingqiu brings them to his lips. "Don't be afraid," he says. "I've known for a while."

Mu Qingfang rises up, leaning on his elbow. "How. How did you know?"

Turning his head so he can see Mu Qingfang better, Shen Qingqiu's lips curve. "After you treated my qi deviation. I knew then something…had changed." He kisses Mu Qingfang's fingers again.

"But I didn't do anything differently!" Mu Qingfang protests.

Sighing a little, Shen Qingqiu turns more fully onto his side. "Yes, you did. You treated me *very* differently." He frowns. "*Before*...you-*he* was …distant. Like…he wasn't really participating in anything, just watching the world go by. I didn't know him well. He was highly respected. But he wasn't well *liked*."

"Oh," Mu Qingfang says softly, feeling rather sad for OG Qingfang.

"I wonder what happened to him," Shen Qingqiu muses.

"He ascended," Mu Qingfang says without thinking. He blinks. Frowns. Ye-es. He thinks that's *true*. All at once, his head feels like a silver spike drives right into the back of his skull. "FUCK!" he shouts, clasping his hands over the back of his neck.

He squeezes his eyes shut, while images flash behind his eyelids.

“A-Yuan!”

A mirror. His own face, but not. A fallen god, reborn as a baby, who then became a peak lord. OG Mu Qingfang’s lost memories returned and he ascended that very night. But--having a soft spot for Cang Qiong, he knew he couldn’t leave the sect without a lead healer. Xuan Zhen, powers fully restored, searched space and time for the perfect soul to fit into this empty space. The one soul that could make it his own.

“Fuck, that hurt,” Mu Qingfang said, rubbing the back of his head. He opens his eyes to find Shen Qingqiu hovering anxiously. “I’m okay, A-Jiu. It’s just that I remembered what happened to the *real* Mu Qingfang.”

“Tell me,” Shen Qingqiu demands, so Mu Qingfang does.

“Should we check on the others?” Mu Qingfang asks at one point that night, much much later, after they’ve cleaned up and had dinner sent up.

He’s curled up behind Shen Qingqiu in the bed. Mu Qingfang was kind of surprised to discover that they ended up back in the room they had rented at the inn. It did have two separate areas for two different people to sleep, but when Shen Qingqiu brought him back here, he’d just taken them to his side of the room.

Now they were sleepily cuddling and chatting.

“Absolutely not,” Shen Qingqiu says, without opening his eyes. “Do *you* really want to deal with Liu Qingge?” He chuckles and adds, “And your head disciple for that matter. It’s hard to choose which one of you is bossier.”

“Hey, I am *not bossy*,” Mu Qingfang protests.

Rolling over partway so he can look directly at Mu Qingfang, Shen Qingqiu has an incredulous expression. “A-Yuan, you *yelled* at the sect leader. Twice.”

Opening his mouth, Mu Qingfang closes it without saying anything. “That doesn’t count,” he mutters finally. “Because he deserved it.”

“He probably did,” Shen Qingqiu agrees, “Knowing Qi-ge. Always sticking his fingers into places he shouldn’t and then wondering why they get pinched.”

After they settle back down, sometime later, Shen Qingqiu says, “I suppose I better update my form after we get back to the sect. Assuming Mu Shidi will sign off on it.”

Mu Qingfang sits straight up in the bed and Shen Qingqiu sighs. “A-Jiu. *How* did you get that form? It was on the table! I wasn’t even going to bring it up with you!”

Laughing a little, Shen Qingqiu grins mischievously. “Well you see, someone invited me to see his delightful garden of demonic plants. And then someone had me open a lovely box of treats from Zui Xian peak. Just my luck, I accidentally knocked that folded up form on the

floor, and happened to look at it when I stood up. Imagine my surprise to see my *own* name on Mu Qingfang's emergency fuck paperwork." Shen Qingqiu pretends to look solemn, tapping his index finger against his lip thoughtfully. "All it needed was my signature, giving my consent, which I *happily* provided." He shrugs. "And then I hand delivered it to Wu Yanshin. And may I add? She was *delighted* about it."

He tugs Mu Qingfang back down and wraps his arms around him. Tucking his chin against Mu Qingfang's head, Shen Qingqiu adds, "It's possible I told Wu Shizhi to contact me if you needed anything."

Mu Qingfang smiles. He was right. *Shen Qingqiu is wonderful.*

"Well, *you* look much better than the last time I saw you," Wu Yanshin says, taking a seat at the same table Mu Qingfang and Shen Qingiu are seated at.

"I feel much better," Mu Qingfang says mildly, avoiding her eyes and ignoring the way his cheeks heat up. At his right side, Shen Qingqiu waves a fan around and sips on tea.

Liu Qingge chooses that moment to drop into the last available chair. "Are we leaving this morning?"

Shen Qingqiu sets his fan down. "That depends. Were there any more people infected with-" His face twists in disgust. "*Spider-cow milk.*"

"It's so horrifying," Mu Qingfang says. "I literally want to vomit just thinking about it."

Liu Qingge sits back in his chair. "We didn't find any other cases. Thankfully. That thing was *disgusting*." He shudders. "*I hate spiders*."

"Well, I'm sticking to soy milk after this," Wu Yanshin agrees.

"We burned the vegetable field to the ground," Liu Shidi announces. "Just in case there was something there that shouldn't be."

"In case it had eggs you mean, Liu Shibo," Wu Yanshin says innocently. She eyes the Bai Zhan peak lord as he glares at her. "What? Wouldn't it be worse if we missed some little spider cows running around, killing people? Or worse! What if they lay their eggs in people! Liu Shibo you wouldn't *believe* some of the disgusting things I've had to see."

Mu Qingfang exchanges a glance with Shen Qingqiu behind his fan, hidden from Liu Shidi. Wu Yanshin is doing a pretty great job of winding Liu Qingge up. Mu Qingfang better intervene before he starts tossing tables around.

"Yanshin."

"Yes, Shizun?" She asks, smiling cheerfully.

“Perhaps round up the rest of the disciples for us, hmm?” Mu Qingfang asks. She winks and then gets up, sauntering away with a bounce in her step.

“There’s…there is something *wrong* with her,” Liu Qingge says, looking cross.

“Mmn. Maybe Liu Shidi should make sure that Wu Shizhi keeps everyone in line so we can *leave*. The sooner the better,” Shen Qingqiu adds. “I would like to sleep in my own bed tonight.” He gives Mu Qingfang a significant look.

Liu Qingge chooses that moment to groan deeply. “Ugh- you two, I am begging you do not be like this when we get back.” He looks so pained.

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes brighten suspiciously. “Why Shidi,” he *purrs*. “Maybe you should make sure that you have a name listed on your emergency fuck form. Just in case.”

“Are you threatening me?!” Liu Qingge growls, eyes narrowed.

“Me? Certainly not.” Shen Qingqiu waves his fan, appearing serene. “Although Yue Qingyuan *also* needs to list someone on his form.” He leans forward, moving in for the kill. “Maybe Liu Shidi should volunteer his *services* to the sect leader in case he should be so… *afflicted*.”

“Shen Qingqiu!”

Deciding he better intervene before these two idiots destroy a perfectly innocent Inn, Mu Qingfang flashes his needles, already held between two fingers. “Consider carefully,” Mu Qingfang says, a pleasant smile on his face. “I put you back together, I can certainly take you apart.”

Nostrils flaring, Liu Qingge stands up, shoving the chair back. “You two. Are. Horrible together.”

The flight back to Cang Qiong Mountain Sect is delightfully boring. They all land on Qiong Ding peak, pretty much where they left from the other day. Zhangmen Shixiong greets them all with smiles, and words of encouragement, and releases the disciples to rest while the three Peak Lords give their report.

Yue Qingyuan has a disciple bring tea and snacks, and everyone kneels on their cushion. “Shen Shidi, if you would begin?”

Shen Qingqiu sighs. “Are you sure I can’t convince you to let me just write it up? The succinct version is that some locals were using some demonic Spider-cow to produce a great deal of milk and then selling it at profit. Unfortunately, the milk was toxic to humans first causing euphoria and then a progressive rash which then sloughed off all the skin. At which point the person died.”

Liu Qingge glares at the table like he can’t believe he has to listen to this again. Mu Qingfang tries not to think of the infant that died solely because of the greedy farmer and his wife.

Under the table, Shen Qingqiu reaches out and squeezes his thigh, prompting him to have to bite his lip so he doesn't start grinning.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Liu Qingge huffs but says nothing. He can clearly see where Shen Qingqiu's hand is from where he's sitting.

"And…what about ah…*damages*," Yue Qingyuan asks delicately.

"Well, Liu Shixiong destroyed a barn but saved Shen Shixiong's and my lives, so personally, I count that as a win." Mu Qingfang says.

"Shidi?" Yue Qingyuan gives Shen Qingqiu a concerned look. "You were in danger?"

"Mu Shidi was in more danger than I." Shen Qingqiu demurs.

Outraged, Mu Qingfang glares at Shen Qingqiu. "That-that *thing* fell right on top of you!"

Shen Qingqiu waves a hand in the air. "You were poisoned. You can't remember it correctly. It was so dusty you couldn't see, but I had rolled away and was fine." He smiles. "Your panicked cries were quite upsetting, even if a bit heart warming."

Liu Qingge grins. "It was pitiful," he agrees. He brings a hand to his chest and rolls his eyes to the ceiling. "*Please! Save Shen Qingqiu*!" He huffs a laugh. "Good thing your disciple was there to drag you out." He looks at Yue Qingyuan. "Screaming the whole way-I didn't know Mu Shidi had it in him."

Abruptly, Mu Qingfang, Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge all consider exactly what Mu Qingfang *had in him*, and all three of them blush.

"I'm going to render myself unconscious. Someone bring my body back to Qian Cao." Mu Qingfang leans an elbow on the table and covers his eyes.

"Well, Zhangmen Shixiong, is there anything else you'd like to know?" Shen Qingqiu.

Frowning, Yue Qingyuan says, "Mu Shidi, the poison?"

Liu Qingge chokes.

"Ah." Mu Qingfang says primly. "You see-"

"Turns out those emergency forms really came in handy," Shen Qingqiu says without a touch of irony in his voice. He taps his finger against his lip. "Qi-ge, remind me. Is your form up to date? Liu Shidi's isn't either."

"I'm leaving!" Liu Qingge says, rising. He leaves without another word.

Yue Qingyuan blinks. "Thanking Shen Shidi for the wisdom."

"As long as you don't step in front of any poisoned knives, you'll be fine," Shen Qingqiu says. "Which reminds me-why did you do that! I *knew* it was coming and was planning on

knocking it aside, which I, as a *Peak Lord* could have done quite easily."

"Oh, look at the time," Mu Qingfang says. "Sorry to report and run Yue Zhangmen, but I really need to check on my garden!" He takes a leaf out of Liu Qingge's book and gets the fuck out.

Chapter End Notes

So I was all set to write a VERY INTENSE sex scene and it just...didn't happen! Shen Yuan wanted to stay Shen Yuan for a little while with all the silliness that entails. Therefore, I am head cannon-ing that the poison also had just a *touch* of truth telling. Because why not, honestly. It's something Great Mater Airplane would have done!

SY: Oooh, there is a really pretty man that I need to have sex with.
SY: I am a virgin please be gentle!
SY: *Dual cultivation buff*
SQQ: "..."
SQQ:"..."
SQQ: "..."

SQQ: the rumors were all true

<3 I love you guys so much!! Thank you for all the love you have given me and this story. Probably one more chapter after this to wrap things up!

Please come tell me what you think!!

And rescue the dying

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings, NONE

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The problem with making such an exit, Mu Qingfang thinks, is that things with Shen Qingqiu are still a bit up in the air.

Like. Are they a thing now? Is this a situationship? Are they *complicated*?

Once he's halfway across Qiong Ding peak he's so deep in his head it takes him several moments to realize that someone's talking to him.

"Who knew you could walk that fast?" Shen Qingqiu says from *right* beside him, and Mu Qingfang jumps a little.

Sheepishly, Mu Qingfang grins. "Sorry-I was thinking."

Dryly, Shen Qingqiu says, "Clearly." They walk in step for a couple of minutes. "What are your plans right now?"

"Now?" Mu Qingfang echoes stupidly. "I…suppose I don't have any."

Shen Qingqiu smiles, pleased. "Well. Now you do." After a few more steps he adds, "My peak is just next door, you know."

"So it is," Mu Qingfang smiles.

So he lets Shen Qingqiu bring him back to the bamboo house. It's not much changed since the last time Mu Qingfang was here. Just a couple of weeks ago, somehow. It feels like it's been much longer than that.

Shen Qingqiu lights a talisman and gives Mu Qingfang a wry look for some reason. "Think of this as a gift," he says inexplicably.

Several minutes later, someone knocks at Shen Qingqiu's door, and he calls them in.

It's the Protagonist! Little Luo Binghe looks much more put together. His hair is still a fluffy halo of tiny curls where it's too short to be pulled into his thick ponytail. His eyes are still deep black and sparkling like stars. And his smile is wide when he spies Mu Qingfang.

“Mu Shishu!” Luo Binghe closes the distance between them at a run, just managing to stop before barrelling into him. Luo Binghe looks to Shen Qingqiu like he’s waiting for some kind of acknowledgement or admonishment. When he gets neither, he simply beams up at Mu Qingfang. “Hello, Mu Shishu! This Luo Binghe is here to serve!”

“Are you a servant or a disciple?” Shen Qingqiu says harshly, then ruins it with a deep sigh. “Little beast, we’ve *talked* about this.”

Wait. They have? “You *have*?” The words burst out of Mu Qingfang, even as he pats the top of Luo Binghe’s head. To Binghe he says, “Look how much you’ve grown! Pretty soon, Binghe will be taller than this old man, ah.”

“Yes, shidi. Heavens know I’ve been *attempting* to get this child to *think* before he acts, however, it appears to be an exercise in futility.” Shen Qingqiu says.

Although Luo Binghe wilts just a little, he addresses his Shizun. “Shizun, how can this disciple be of service?”

“Better,” Shen Qingqiu tells him, and the boy brightens. “Binghe, have you finished your work for today?”

“Yes, Shizun!”

“Hmm.” Mu Qingfang didn’t know until that moment that you could make a hum sound disbelieving. Shen Qingqiu says, “Fine. Go make something sweet for Mu Shishu and bring it back here when ready.”

“Thank you Shizun!” Luo Binghe sketches a quick bow at each of the peak lords, then turns and bolts.

Mu Qingfang blinks. Wow, that kid sure can run fast when he wants to.

“I despair of teaching that boy any manners,” Shen Qingqiu mutters, rubbing a hand over his face. To Mu Qingfang he says, “He’s a willful little brat, too eager to please. He can cook well enough to put your friends at Zui Xian to shame, though.” He gestures to the table. “Sit, A-Yuan. I will make tea.”

Mu Qingfang’s face heats at the sound of his true name in Shen Qingqiu’s voice. It also settles the anxiety bubbling in his chest. “A-Jiu,” he murmurs, just to taste the words on his lips.

“Mn? What is it?” Shen Qingqiu calls, sticking a heating talisman on the pot full of water.

Shaking his head just a little, Mu Qingfang says, “I just wanted to say it. Make sure I’m not dreaming.”

That gets a smile out of Shen Qingqiu. *Dimples!* He pours the hot water over the tea leaves in the teapot, swirls it briefly, then dumps the water. He then refills it, bringing the steaming teapot over to the table. “If I am,” he says, “Then I’d rather stay asleep.”

Warm happiness bubbles in Mu Qingfangs chest. This man!!!! He watches Shen Qingqiu bring the tea service to the table. Once the tea is poured, Mu Qingfang sips happily. “You make the best tea, A-Jiu.”

“Well. I’m glad you think so,” Shen Qingqiu says, keeping his eyes on Mu Qingfang’s. “Do you play weiqi?”

“Uh-not well.” Mu Qingfang confesses with a smile.

“Let’s fix that,” Shen Qingqiu offers. He gets up and brings back the board and bag of stones from the back of the house. Shen Qingqiu explains the game and how it’s used to teach strategy as part of Qing Jing’s curriculum.

Mu Qingfang, as he expects, gets destroyed. He’s not upset about it, just keeps making jokes that if he sees Shen Qingqiu playing with someone else, he can place his bets appropriately.

Shen Qingqiu warns him, “I can beat all the other peak lords, no questions. Liu Qingge, believe it or not, is sometimes a challenge, if only because his strategies are-more in *my* head than in his.”

That surprises a laugh out of Mu Qingfang and nearly has tea coming out of his nose. Peerless immortal, who?

Luo Binghe returns some time later, bearing red bean cakes. There’s a spot of flour on his cheek, and Mu Qingfang motions him closer. When the boy approaches, Mu Qingfang says, “Binghe you’ve got-” He reaches up and wipes away the flour. Luo Binghe starts stammering and blushing and Mu Qingfang wants to bully him and pinch his cute little cheekies.

“Leave them on the table, Binghe, and return to your studies.” Shen Qingqiu says, rolling his eyes.

Luo Binghe bows again, and takes his leave.

“There, you see?” Shen Qingqiu asks. “Trust me, once you have these, you’ll be here bothering my disciple for food, since nobody on Qian Cao feeds you.” He pushes the plate to Mu Qingfang’s side of the table.
Taste explodes over his tongue, and Mu Qingfang closes his eyes and moans. “Mnph. That is-” He licks his fingers clean. “So. Fucking. *Good*.” He opens his eyes and discovers Shen Qingqiu boldly staring at him.

Wait, a second, Mu Qingfang thinks. He’s seen that look from him before. Except now-now he’s also seen it in *other*, more *naked* contexts. “Oh,” he breathes in astonishment. “It-it wasn’t just a one off?”

“Is that what you wanted?” Shen Qingqiu says, after a moment.

Unable to lie, to even *consider* lying, Mu Qingfang says, “No. I want-everything. If it’s with you.”

Expression softening, Shen Qingqiu reaches out across the table, and brushes some crumbs away from the corner of Mu Qingfang's mouth. "I think you'll find there's very little I would deny you."

Taking a deep breath, Mu Qingfang says, "A-Jiu, I hope that's true, because there's one more secret I need to share with you."

Mu Qingfang's not going to lie. He didn't think that Shen Qingqiu was going to take the news about Luo Binghe being a half demon very well. He certainly didn't expect that Shen Shixiong would sigh and run a palm over his face.

"I was doing very well *without* this information, Mu Shidi," Shen Qingqiu says, and Mu Qingfang can't help flinching at the tone of his voice and the way he said *Shidi*. Mu Qingfang's gotten kind of used to hearing his real name from Shen Qingqiu and --well, shit.

It *hurts*, okay? Mu Qingfang presses his lips together and looks down at the table. Without looking up, he says thickly, "I…I know. But, I couldn't just *not* tell you, not since we…" His throat is tight. "Yeah, I should-" He stands up, ready to flee.

A sharp smack lands on his forehead. "You should sit *right the fuck down*," Shen Qingqiu snaps, clenching his fan. "No running away, A-Yuan. I can't believe *I'm* the one saying this but, just because I am *rightfully annoyed* to discover that you've known that my most annoying disciple is *half heavenly demon* this whole time…."

Mu Qingfang can't stand waiting, and so he glances up. Shen Qingqiu meets his eyes. "I don't want you to leave." Shen Qingqiu leans back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. "And I am allowed to be pissed off about this."

"Yes, A-Jiu," Mu Qingfang agrees meekly, sitting his ass back in his chair. "Asking for forgiveness."

"Hmm." Shen Qingqiu looks skeptical. "You know, I'm pretty sure that Shang Shidi has a saying about that. Doesn't he." It is not a question. They've *both* heard Shang Qinghua muttering under his breath that it's better to ask forgiveness rather than permission.

"He does," Mu Qingfang confirms.

Shen Qingqiu gives him a searching look. "A-Yuan, come with me."

Mu Qingfang follows him out of the bamboo house, down the walkway. It splits into several directions. One path leads toward Qiong Ding peak. The seconds leads directly to the learning pavilions. They take the third path, which curves around the back of the bamboo house, and leads deep into the bamboo forest.

The wind rustles through the bamboo, and the large hollow poles of bamboo make a pleasant noise as they move with the breeze. It is very restful, and Mu Qingfang starts to feel a bit better, just by walking around outside.

Eventually, Shen Qingqiu remarks, "You have your demonic plants." He pauses, looking him in the eyes. "I have this forest. It…keeps me sane some days." He reaches out, and Mu Qingfang takes his hand, with some relief. Shen Qingqiu squeezes. "I want to show you something."

The bamboo forest is thick in places, and they follow what feels like an animal trail through the woods. The ground becomes rockier, and the bamboo becomes sparse. All at once, they climb some large worn rocks, and then they're looking out over the entire Tian Gong mountain range.

"Qing Jing peak is the second highest peak," Shen Qingqiu says smugly. "Look, you can see where the sun rises, just *there*." He points. Right now the sun is behind them, setting on the *other* side of the mountain range. "The moon will rise soon. Let's watch it."

Shen Qingqiu indicates the top of the rocky outcropping which is flat where they're standing. Just a few feet ahead, it drops off into a sheer cliff. Mu Qingfang sinks down first, crossing his legs under him. After a moment, Shen Qingqiu settles down next to him, close enough that their shoulders touch.
"Are you very angry with me?" Mu Qingfang ventures.

A sigh. Then, "I'm trying, but it's difficult." Shen Qingqiu admits. "I'll…get over it." Then he frowns. "Did you think I would hurt him?"

"A-Jiu, no!" Mu Qingfang exclaims. "No," he says, more softly. "I was more worried about waiting."

"What do you mean?" Shen Qingqiu asks, after a moment.

Oh, this is hard. Mu Qingfang can't really think of any good way to say this, actually. He shifts uncomfortably. "So…we've gotten… really close, and…I want to keep, you know, being close with you. And. I was afraid that…if I waited to tell you, that…that you wouldn't be able to forgive me. I-I really couldn't bear that." He finishes this little awkward speech by staring down at his hands where he's anxiously picking his nails.

"Look at me, A-Yuan." Shen Qingqiu says seriously, and Mu Qingfang bites his lip, and meets his gaze. "I don't know much about…*relationships*. I've spent most of my life alone." His brows draw together, deeply furrowing his brow. "There's things…" He shakes his head. "I had no idea I could even *want*...not until…" He swallows. "Until *you*."

Mu Qingfang moves before he's conscious of it. Reaching out, wrapping his arms around Shen Qingqiu. He holds the other man tightly. "I feel the same," he confesses, and Shen Qingqiu's arms tighten around his shoulders.

It turns out the kissing under the rising moon is actually *great* for Mu Qingfang's anxiety.

So after that, things don't actually change much. Mu Qingfang returns to attending clinics a few times a week, although Wu Yanshin has limited him to half days only. He rounds in the main Healing Pavilion.

He sees Shen Qingqiu as often as both of their schedules allow. Now, however, instead of flying down to the Warm Red Pavilion when he wants a good night's sleep, he'll just show up at Mu Qingfang's door step and go flop in his bed.

Mu Qingfang finds this *unbearably* cute. Once A-Jiu settles down in his bed, Mu Qingfang naturally joins him soon after. Mu Qingfang has learned in the last few months that Shen Qingqiu likes to be held, and falls asleep quickly and easily with Mu Qingfang curling protectively around him.

For his part, Mu Qingfang also finds it easier to sleep knowing that Shen Qingqiu is safe and warm, right next to him. It soothes something deep inside, that even Shen Yuan hadn't known he was missing.

The doctor in him strongly suspects it's a version of touch starvation. He would never mention this to Shen Qingqiu, but to his eyes, it is obvious how Shen Qingqiu relaxes with just an easy touch of his hand.

His A-Jiu hasn't been touched very gently for most of his life. Mu Qingfang wants nothing more than to continue to do so for a long, long time.

Mu Qingfang keeps up with his strays that are now integrating into his peak. Fang Liu and Fang Duyi have healed from their frostbite injuries, although they both lost a couple of toes. They both walk with a stilted gait, but are getting around well.

They have become quick friends with Cheng Delun, the boy who's broken arm Mu Qingfang treated in town. Only Cheng Delun has the proper spirit veins to start cultivating, but that doesn't seem to affect their friendship.

Once everyone is healed and feeling better, they start getting into mischief as a group, in all sorts of places they're not supposed to be. Mu Qingfang probably isn't supposed to feel as amused about this as he does.

Xie Yanmei calls him on his snickering one day after all three of the children were caught feeding hunks of a dead bird they'd found to Mu Qingfang's Creeping Blood Bush.

Yanmei looks *furious* as she explains what the kids have been up to, and all three children are kneeling down in front of Mu Qingfang at his office in the Healing Pavilion.

"My, you three have been busy!" Mu Qingfang says, accidentally sounding fond. Xie Yanmei shoots him a glare over the kids backs that promises hell for him if he doesn't get his act together. Scary! "Lun-er, were you finished with all of your cultivation work before you

started playing with Liu-er and Duyi-er?" There, he thinks. Suitably serious! Xie Yanmei leans against the doorframe and rolls her eyes.

"Shizun was not aware that the youngest members of his peak were knowledgeable about demonic plants." Mu Qingfang eyes them carefully. "Did you know that one of the plants in that row emits a pollen which is *extremely* neurotoxic and causes instant paralysis and death?" His tone is mild, like he's asking about tea, which is why he's literally *shocked* when they start crying.

Ah! What?! No, no no, don't cry! Mu Qingfang thinks frantically. "Shizun is not angry with you. Shizun is *thankful* his precious disciples are *safe*!" That just makes them cry *harder*. He crouches down in front of them, three pitiful children all in a row, heads to the floor. "Sit up, everyone, and please look at me."

Three teary faces greet him. Mu Qingfang wants to cuddle them and wipe their tears so badly, but Xie Yanmei gives him another death glare. "Now," he says calmly. "I am sure that you three have things that you were actually *supposed* to be doing. Since you all seem to need more work in order to stay out of *life threatening situations* you may write some lines." His eyes meet Yanmei's. "I will stay away from Shizun's dangerous garden, five hundred times."

As one, the children wilt. Xie Yanmei, at least, looks mostly satisfied with the outcome. He gets it. Cheng Delun is the only actual disciple of the three, as Feng Liu and Feng Duyi do not have open spirit veins. So had they been injured or poisoned from one of his plants, Mu Qingfang might not have been able to save them. So, a little guilt was fine for them, especially if it prevented them from endangering themselves in the future.

He dismisses the children. Xie Yanmei plunks herself down on the other side of his desk.

"Shizun, I really thought you were going to start hugging them." Xie Yanmei sighs. "You're a soft touch these days."

Mu Qingfang laughs. "Yanmei, they were already punishing themselves! So many tears, how could I punish them harshly, ah?" His smile fades slowly.

"Is Shen Shibo not back from his night hunt yet?" Xie Yanmei asks, seemingly out of the blue.

"Ah?" Mu Qingfang leans forward. "No, he went down to Shuang He city with his disciples and hasn't returned yet. Definitely let me know if you hear anything."

She nods. "Shizun, Yue Shibo sent a letter stating that Liu Shibo is going to enter Ling Xi caves for secluded meditation."

Oh, shit, Mu Qingfang thinks. He's basically so focused on his day to day life he *forgot about the Plot!* Fuck his life. He runs a hand over his face. "I need to check his meridians before he enters. And give him an emergency flare," he adds. Liu Qingge has become much less annoying since they returned from He Luo town, thankfully. It's made Peak Lord meetings much more tolerable.

Later in the day, Liu Qingge kicks the door to his office in. “Mu Qingfang! Why have you delayed my seclusion?”

Rolling his eyes a bit, Mu Qingfang says mildly. “I enjoy your company and don’t wish to find your dead body in the caves, Liu Shixiong. Your wrist.”

Liu Qingge glares impatiently, but extends his arm. A quick scan reveals normal meridians, no sign of strain. Thankfully. Mu Qingfang lets him take his hand back. “Your spiritual veins are fine. However. Meditating for long periods of time in the caves can be dangerous.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Liu Qingge says flatly. “I haven’t died yet.”

Survivor bias! Clenching his jaw for a moment, Mu Qingfang says, “Do not make me have to inform your family that anything has happened to you.” He shoves an emergency talisman at the Bai Zhan peak lord. “Take this. Keep it with you. Use it if you feel *any* irregularity.”

Liu Shixiong grumbles, but stuffs the talisman in his sleeve and leaves without a further word. Once he’s gone, Mu Qingfang leaves Qian Cao peak for An Ding. He needs to talk with Shang Qinghua.

The An Ding peak lord is currently buried under paperwork. Mu Qingfang finds him at his desk, in his leisure house. Shang Qinghua’s desk is barely visible under the stacks of scrolls. There are four separate piles alone, and Mu Qingfang is afraid to even sit down lest he inadvertently knock things out of place and cause Shang Shixiong to have a qi deviation. “Have you eaten or slept in the last 48 hours?” He asks.

“Bro-” Shang Qinghua yawns, then blinks a few times. “I have no idea what *day* it is, and you want me to remember the last time I *slept*? Come on. Do you need something? It’s probably gonna take awhile.”

Frowning, Mu Qingfang leans forward. “Airplane. Shen Qingqiu took his disciples to Shuang He city, and Liu Qingge is going to enter seclusion tomorrow, if not this very evening. I need to know-Did your version of Shen Qingqiu *really* try to kill Liu Qingge?” He refuses to believe it. He can’t. He *won’t*.

Shang Qinghua meets his eyes. “Fuck, is it that time already?” He runs a palm over his face. “Okay, don’t freak out, Cucumber bro. The Shen Qingqiu in the story, actually tried to save Liu Shidi’s life.” he shakes his head, pressing his lips together. “He tried, and failed. Liu Qingge had one last moment of clarity, and he realized that he was about to kill Shen Shixiong, so he turned Cheng Luan back on himself.”

Mu Qingfang slumps in his chair. “Okay. So. How do we save Liu Qingge’s life? I checked him over and his meridians actually seem fine. Airplane…what should I do?”

“Okay, look. Shen Qingqiu is much different *now* than how I wrote him, okay? Didn’t you tell me how you fixed his cultivation? So he shouldn’t fall into a deviation if he tries to help Liu Shidi- and he *will* try.” Airplane meets Mu Qingfang’s eyes. “He will try because that’s

what he would have done to *begin* with, but bro, come on, look at everything you've changed just since you got here! Shen Qingqiu is a LOT more stable now, than I ever wrote him." Shang Qinghua shrugs. "I think you have to have some faith."

"I *do* have faith in Shen Shixiong," Mu Qingfang says. "But I'm also not above stacking the deck in his favor."

Chapter End Notes

Okay okay I admit it! I am a CLOWN, capitol C! I really really thought that I could wrap this all up, neat with a bow. And then I started writing chapter 14. And was like "...."

I need more time!!!! So if you'll notice, I took away the chapter count because I have no idea! I will just be real with you guys. As long as MQF/SY keeps talking in my head I will keep writing his story!

SQQ: My disciple is a WHAT

MQF: *smiles nervously,prepares to FLEE*

SQQ: SIT YOUR ASS BACK DOWN

Regardless of the Hardships

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: Kleenex

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Mu Qingfang returns to Qian Cao peak, he finds chaos in the Healing Pavilion. Shen Qingqiu is back from his mission, and has dragged two disciples in for a check up. From the shouting that he can hear all the way down the hallway, Mu Qingfang doesn't think it's going well.

Wei Xiuying is working and Shen Qingqiu doesn't appear to be inclined to allow her to scan his disciples.

"We will wait for Mu Shidi," Shen Qingqiu tells her forbiddingly, in an increasingly hostile voice, and Mu Qingfang starts walking faster.

"But Shizun, it's really fine," is that Luo Binghe? Tries to say and Shen Qingqiu just silences the kid.

"If I were you, Luo Binghe, I would certainly *keep my mouth shut*." Oh, wow, Shen Qingqiu sounds *pissed*. Mu Qingfang can't even remember the last time he's heard him sound so angry.

"Shen Shixiong," Mu Qingfang greets, only a little out of breath. *A-Jiu, if you sent me a message I would have met you here!*

Luo Binghe and Ning Yingying are sitting next to each other on the exam table while Shen Qingqiu paces anxiously back and forth.

"Mu Shidi, *finally*," Shen Qingqiu says. "My idiot disciples *got captured by a Skinner demon* and nearly *died*. Please check them over, while I go report to Zhangmen Shixiong."

Blinking in surprise, Mu Qingfang says mildly, "Of course. I will take care of it."

Shen Qingqiu meets his eyes. His shoulders drop a couple of centimeters. "Thank you," he says, then glares at his two disciples before leaving in an angry swirl of robes.

"Well then," Mu Qingfang says briskly. "Would one of you like to tell me what happened?"

Luo Binghe and Ning Yingying exchange glances. Hesitantly Luo Binghe begins, “We descended the mountain to investigate the disappearance of some girls. We visited Lord Chen who had a bunch of concubines. He was so creepy, Mu Shishu, he had this young girl on his lap, it was gross!” Binghe wrinkles his nose. CUTE!

Continuing, Luo Binghe says, “Afterwards, Shizun had us looking for clues. We got to talk to some brothel ladies and they were really nice. Mu Shishu, did you know that when brothel ladies go missing, it’s like nobody cares?”

“Yes, unfortunately, I know, Binghe,” Mu Qingfang says softly.

Ning Yingying bounces on the exam table and Mu Qingfang worries she’s going to fall off. “I asked Shizun if I could go shopping in the market, and he said I could if I took Luo Shidi with me. But when we were walking around, we saw Lord Chen’s concubine, the really young one, walking around by herself! That didn’t seem safe when there’s a demon running around killing people!”

Oh dear gods, Mu Qingfang can tell where this is going and he didn’t even need to remember this scene in Proud Immortal Demon Way to do it. He rubs his fingers over the bridge of his nose, suddenly sympathizing with Shen Qingqiu.

“Anyway,” Luo Binghe says, “We stopped her and asked if she wanted to walk around with us.” He frowns. “Except-”

“She was the Skinner demon?” Mu Qingfang interrupts, and both children deflate. “And did Shen Shixiong have to rescue his disciples from this demon?”

Luo Binghe stares down at his hands, shame evident. “Yes, Mu Shishu. Of course Shizun saved us.”

“Yingying was so scared, Mu Shishu! But Shizun came just in time, because Luo Shidi was tied up with Immortal Binding Cables and she was about to slit my throat and steal my skin!” Ning Yingying looks like she’s about to burst into tears again. Luo Binghe looks upset just thinking about it.

“Shizun is the best!” Luo Binghe says, eyes sparkling. “He blew the door apart and then just took her head off with one swing of his sword!”

Mu Qingfang thinks he had better get out one of the good wine jars for A-Jiu. “That sounds too scary for this old man. Binghe, let's run a quick scan, make sure those binding cables haven't done any damage.”

Luo Binghe pales. “They…they can do that?”

Snorting a little, Mu Qingfang says absently, “Most certainly. Anything that disrupts the normal flow of qi can put you at risk for a qi deviation.” Fortunately, Luo Binghe’s cultivation is sound, and his meridians are wide and strong. There’s no evidence of harm from the binding cables, and happily, no evidence that he was ever harmed by using that first false cultivation manual. “Luo Binghe, you are lucky,” Mu Qingfang stresses. “That Shen

Qingqiu is such a good master to you both. Because you and Ning Yingying could *have died* as a result of your carelessness, and that is why Shen Qingqiu is so upset and angry."

Unfortunately, this little speech backfires and he ends up with two crying disciples. He pats Luo Binghe on the head, and the boy just flings himself at Mu Qingfang.

"Mu Shishu, I'm so sorry! This Binghe will be better for Shizun!"

At the same time, Ning Yingying jumps down from the table and *also* flings her arms around Mu Qingfang. "Yingying was wrong!" She wails.

Helplessly, Mu Qingfang gives both children a hug. These cute little buns! "Now, now. Everything turned out all right. This time you got lucky. Make sure next time you don't need to depend on *luck* or someone rescuing you, okay? Practice hard and get strong."

He leaves the room and calls Wei Xiuying back to prepare some calming tea for Luo Binghe and Ning Yingying. "Oh," he adds, "We'd better put Ning Yingying in her own room in case she falls asleep, don't you think?"

"Yes, Shizun," Wei Xiuying says and disappears to make tea.

About two hours later, Shen Qingqiu returns to find Mu Qingfang in his office. Outwardly Shen Shixiong looks the same as always, but he's carrying tension around his eyes and mouth. Mu Qingfang's heart sinks. "Mu Shidi," Shen Qingqiu greets, then shuts the door behind him, tossing a privacy talisman on it for good measure.

Mu Qingfang stands up, moving closer. "A-Jiu." He says simply, and steps right into Shen Qingqiu's arms.

"A-Yuan. You would not *believe* those stupid children.They nearly *died*! If I was just a few minutes later…" He buries his head against Mu Qingfang's hair and his fingers clench against Mu Qingfang's waist.

"I'm glad you're all right," Mu Qingfang says, scratching his fingernails against Shen Qingqiu's skull. Shen Qingqiu goes practically boneless, relaxing and leaning heavily on Mu Qingfang. It's all good. Mu Qingfang will hold him up. "Why don't you let the kids stay here overnight? Stay with me tonight and you can take them home in the morning." Shen Qingqiu makes an interested sound, so Mu Qingfang keeps talking. "You can get a good night's sleep tonight. I already gave them some calming tea. That will probably knock them out after the stress."

"All right, you've convinced me," Shen Qingqiu says, not lifting his head at all. After a few more minutes, Shen Qingqiu straightens up. "I supposed I should check on my brats." He meets Mu Qingfang's eyes.

"Okay," Mu Qingfang says. "Come to mine when you're finished, I'm heading home now." He leans up and kisses Shen Qingqiu on the cheek, but when he pulls back, Shen Qingqiu

just follows the motion and kisses him for real.

It's too brief, Mu Qingfang thinks as they part. "See you soon."

It's only a short walk back to his home, and once there Mu Qingfang prepares some calming tea. If Shen Qingqiu doesn't want any, he can always keep it under a stasis talisman. He changes out of his robes into lighter ones meant for sleeping, and leaves out a set for Shen Qingqiu, though he may have his own. A-Jiu always carries around everything he can think of in his qiankun sleeves.

Shen Qingqiu arrives a short time later, still looking way too stressed for Mu Qingfang's comfort. While Shen Qingqiu collapses on his bed, Mu Qingfang retrieves some tea, liberally sweetened with honey.

For a moment he lingers in the doorway. Shen Qingqiu apparently sat down on the edge of the bed and slopped backward, one arm over his eyes and his feet still on the floor. "I have tea for you," he says.

Sitting up, Shen Qingqiu rubs his eyes. "The rest of my disciples will be arriving soon at Qing Jing peak. I had them take the horses and I flew the kids back here myself."

Okay, A-Jiu, could you *lead* with that next time, please? "May I scan you?" Mu Qingfang asks.

Shen Qingqiu arches an eyebrow. "And if I say no?" The question is mild.

Sighing, Mu Qingfang says, "Then I won't. But I would strongly suggest you see Xie Yanmei tomorrow and allow her to." After a moment he adds, "You know I should have mentioned before this, that it's perfectly reasonable if you want a different healer-"

"I didn't say that," Shen Qingqiu interrupts. "Don't put words in my mouth." Mu Qingfang meets his gaze, and a short time later Shen Qingqiu looks away and mutters, "Sorry."

"Drink the tea, A-Jiu." Mu Qingfang says flatly. He hands the cup over, then crouches down, and starts pulling Shen Qingqiu's boots off. The socks come after and he just flings them on the floor.

"If everyone knew how untidy Mu Shidi is," Shen Qingqiu says, tea already starting to work, thankfully. He drains the rest of the cup, and Mu Qingfang takes it and lays it on his night table.

Mu Qingfang gets in bed with his back to the headboard. "Come up here," he says, patting his lap. Without any protest, Shen Qingqiu crawls up toward the head of the bed, and lays his head on Mu Qingfang's lap.

Mu Qingfang removes the heavy hair peace, and frees A-Jiu's hair so that it's loose and flowing over his shoulders. He plunges his fingers through, gently scratching his nails against Shen Qingqiu's scalp.

“Fucking idiot disciples,” Shen Qingqiu’s voice is muffled. “How did I raise such stupid children?”

“It’s not your fault,” Mu Qingfang says. It’s literally not! Blame Great Master Airplane!

“What if I didn’t make it in time?” Shen Qingqiu says softly. “How could I live with that? Yingying…”

Saying nothing, Mu Qingfang continues petting Shen Qingqiu’s head. “A-Jiu, you did so well. Your disciples are safe. The demon is dead, and now you’re home and can relax.”

Shen Qingqiu mutters something that Mu Qingfang doesn’t catch. He lifts his head and says more clearly, “Come down here, I want to sleep.”

A wave of his hand puts out the candles, and Mu Qingfang slides down into a lying position. Knowing what Shen Qingqiu *wants* but won’t actually *ask* for, he wraps his arms firmly around him, holding him close. “Go to sleep, A-Jiu.”

“A-Yuan.” Shen Qingqiu squeezes him once, and between one breath and another, falls asleep.

Mu Qingfang wakes up to find Shen Qingqiu already awake and staring at his face. This weirdo, he thinks affectionately. “Hi.”

“Good morning.” Shen Qingqiu says simply. “Can’t we just stay in bed today?”

“I would love that,” Mu Qingfang admits. “But we both have stuff to do. Sadly.”

“Mn.” Shen Qingqiu meets his eyes. “You can check my meridians if you want.”

“I want,” Mu Qingfang agrees and lays his fingers against his wrist. By now he’s quite familiar with Shen Qingqiu’s meridians. He’s gotten quite a bit stronger since his breakthrough a few months ago. No blockages, and none of those weird thinned out places. “Very nice,” Mu Qingfang says, pleased. “No issues whatsoever.”

That makes Shen Qingqiu perk up. “Really?”

Mu Qingfang leans forward and pecks him on the lips. “Really.” He leans in, pressing their foreheads together. “I hope today is a better day for you, A-Jiu.

Shen Qingqiu meets his eyes and smiles. “It already is.”

After they’re both dressed and ready to face the day, Shen Qingqiu takes Mu Qingfang’s arm before he opens the door. “A-Yuan, wait a moment.” He has a complicated expression. Then he lays one hand on Mu Qingfang’s cheek and leans forward, pressing a soft lingering kiss to his mouth.

Mu Qingfang responds happily, deepening the kiss and humming in surprised pleasure. After a few minutes, Shen Qingqiu draws back, eyes warm.

“Shidi….” Shen Qingqiu hesitates. His brow furrows for a few seconds before the expression is wiped away. “I’ll miss you.” He doesn’t wait for an answer, but leaves immediately, hurrying across the courtyard toward the Healing Pavilion.

Clinic is interesting because there are often theme days! Completely unplanned of course, but some days he gets nothing but wounds. Other days it’s a mix of upper respiratory illnesses. Today’s theme has already reared its head.

He’s only seen three patients and they all presented with chest pain and shortness of breath. All middle aged men from different backgrounds. One man, Mu Qingfang’s pretty sure has a clot in his lung. This gentleman just returned from a long trip in which he was in a carriage for the entire previous day. The shortness of breath came on suddenly, followed by chest pain.

Mu Qingfang gives him some herbs to thin his blood, with instructions to eat as much garlic as he can for the next two weeks.

The second man is a local laborer. He developed chest pain while chopping wood yesterday. It comes and goes but is associated mostly with movement. The pain gets worse when he takes a deep breath. Willow bark tea! This gentleman overdid it and probably pulled a muscle between his ribs.

The third man, unfortunately, actually has a cardiac issue. He developed pain in his chest last night, and this morning has a terrible toothache and jaw pain. Fuck! A heart attack. The man’s not a cultivator, but Mu Qingfang scans him, attempting to see if he can locate where the blockage is. He..he can *feel it* just fine..One of the arteries supplying the left side of his heart is blocked.

Fuck! He really needs a cath lab to angioplasty the vessel open.Mu Qingfang’s a good doctor but he’s not about to do open heart surgery. He doesn’t dare try to do anything using his qi- the risk of breaking off a chunk of that clot and causing further damage AND/OR a stroke is very high.

This man receives distilled Foxglove pills, and as many herbal anticoagulants as he can manage. Mu Qingfang gives him a very careful explanation and instructions to avoid heavy activity such as chopping wood. The man just looks at him, and Mu Qingfang understands all too clearly that he doesn’t have much of a choice if he would like to get paid.

The man thanks him for his time and leaves.

After that he gets a young woman having heart palpitations. Mu Qingfang advises her to drink more water and less tea while he wishes for a stethoscope. He’s pretty sure she has

mitral regurgitation. Again, he can't fix this!

A couple of hungry street kids linger around his tent, giving him hopeful looks. Mu Qingfang checks over his shoulder. Xie Yanmei is tied up with a patient, so he beckons the kids to come over to him, and pulls a couple pork buns from a qiankun pouch. He has learned to buy a bunch of these so he can hand them out to hungry folks.

Mu Qingfang really *hates* that kids are out here trying to survive on the streets. He lets them rest at the back of the tent where it's shady and brings them a jar of water to drink. Xie Yanmei meets his eyes. He watches her sigh from across the tent.

Then Xie Yanmei goes over to talk to them. She checks their spirit veins. She stands up and nods. Two more strays acquired! The kids hang around until Mu Qingfang is ready to return to the sect. Xie Yanmei will stay for the full day.

The two children clamber aboard Mu Qingfang's sword and back to Qian Cao they go! Wu Yanshin at this point doesn't even blink in the face of two more dirty and bruised children.

Some time later, Wu Yanshin comes to find him in his office. "Shizun," she says, unusually sober.

Looking up from his paperwork, Mu Qingfang asks, "What's wrong."

She sits in the chair on the other side of his desk. Wu Yanshin is not a woman given to fiddling nervously with her hands, so this is concerning.

"Yanshin?"

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you," She says. "Shen Shibo…"

"What? What's wrong, did something happen?" Mu Qingfang leans forward, trying not to panic.

"No, it's. He's not *injured*, Shizun," Wu Yanshin says, and Mu Qingfang feels like he can breathe. "Yue Zhangmen sent over a note this morning to let us know." She meets his eyes and swallows. "Shen Shibo…went into seclusion today."

Frowning, Mu Qingfang says, "No, that's not right, I just saw him this morning, he would have-" He clacks his jaw shut, suddenly aware that he's blabbing his personal info. He sits back in his chair. Blindsided is an understatement, he thinks morosely. Did he do something wrong so that Shen Qingqiu thought he couldn't tell him? Was this a spur of the moment thing?

"Thank you for informing me," he says distantly, without meeting her eyes. "Dismissed."

"Shizun-"

"Yanshin, *please*." He doesn't look up when she quietly shuts the door behind him.

Mu Qingfang finds out from Yue Qingyuan that Shen Qingqiu was planning for a three year period of secluded cultivation. Apparently his nighthunt with his students upset him to the point that he felt it necessary to go immediately to the spirit caves to try and advance his cultivation.

It's difficult not to feel hurt over this, and so Mu Qingfang wallows in sadness for as long as his disciples let him. He's not quite at the point where he's hiding from the world while lying in bed a la Shen Yuan but…he's definitely not interacting as much.

He forces himself to attend at least one clinic a week, but honestly, he lets Xie Yanmei takes the lead. She doesn't even acknowledge the elephant in the room but just quietly sends him patients with conditions that he can treat, if not outright fix.

He sees a lot of lacerations and broken bones for months.

Fortunately, Qian Cao peak runs itself for the most part. Wu Yanshin has been doing the majority of the paperwork for some time, but in an effort to give himself something mindless, he starts taking care of it.

He doesn't understand why his disciples keep whispering when they see him in the hallways. Everyone seems to keep their voices down when he's around. The entire atmosphere on Qian Cao peak becomes subdued, not that anyone talks to him about it.

Besides, what's to talk about?

Two months after Liu Qingge and Shen Qingqiu entered seclusion, Shang Qinghua shows up on his doorstep.

"Hey Airplane," Mu Qingfang greets. He steps aside to let his friend in.

Shang Qinghua gives him a critical look. "Uh, bro, you look like crap."

"Yeah, well." Mu Qingfang can't argue with that afterall. He doesn't see any reason he should take pains with his appearance. Like. What's the point, even? "You want to sit?"

Shang Qinghua takes a seat at the table and Mu Qingfang silently makes tea.

He brings the service back to the table and pours.

"Wow, like I heard things were rough over here but like." Shang Qinghua leans forward. "No one told me that you were having such a bad depression episode."

"I'm not depressed," Mu Qingfang says listlessly. He can't even muster up any annoyance. "I go to work every day. I take baths. I even do my paperwork. "

"Yeah, I noticed, and let me say that your head disciple's calligraphy is way better than yours." Shang Qinghua snarks.

They sit in silence for several minutes.

Airplane sighs. “I don’t think he thought it would affect you like this,” he says eventually. “If he did, he probably wouldn’t have…”

Mu Qingfang has nothing to say to that. What can he say? He bounces his leg aggressively, until he remembers that no one’s here to stop him. His throat tightens and he stops bouncing.

“You know he’s…coming back, right?” Shang Qinghua says hesitantly.

Yeah, Airplane. He knows. That doesn’t make it any easier. Shang Qinghua leaves soon after that.

One afternoon, there is an insistent knocking on his door. Mu Qingfang ignores it, but whoever it is, is quite insistent. Finally, he angrily whips the covers back on his bed and stomps to the front door, hair still down and in two layers of inner robes.

“What!” He barks, throwing the door open.

Luo Binghe blinks at him, then his expression fills with determination. “Mu Shishu, this disciple has made some treats for you.”

And then! This little brat just-shoves past him! Luo Binghe produces a rather large box. “Before he went into seclusion, Shizun called this disciple to the bamboo house.” He meets Mu Qingfang’s eyes. “Shizun was…still upset, but before he left for Qiong Ding peak he ordered this disciple to --” Binghe looks down, cheeks a little pink. “He told this disciple to keep his eyes and ears open and if it seemed like Mu Shishu was not doing well, that this disciple should make some treats and bring them to Peak Lord Mu.”

“Shizun also told this disciple that if he had any medical needs at all, no one but Mu Shishu was to see him.” Luo Binghe bites his lips after he rushes through his words.

It makes sense, the distant part of Mu Qingfang’s mind thinks. Now that he was aware Binghe is half heavenly demon, he’d want to make sure that other healers weren’t paying too much attention to him.

Mu Qingfang drifts over to the table, and opens the box. He blinks, his eyes becoming blurry.

Water chestnut cakes. He laughs wetly. “These are my favorite.”

“Yes, Mu Shishu,” Luo Binghe says, softly. “Shizun told this disciple.”

Mu Qingfang struggles mightily to *not* breakdown in front of this kid, but…he’s not winning this battle. Finally he just decides fuck it, Binghe is going to have to cope with knowing Mu Shishu is human. He straightens up, and turns to face Luo Binghe.

“You’re a good boy, Binghe.” Mu Qingfang says, thickly. “Thank you. I will-” His voice gives out and more tears leak from his eyes. “I-*oof*!”

Luo Binghe flings himself at Mu Qingfang and squeezes him hard around the middle. Mu Qingfang closes his eyes and pets Binghe's head. Luo Binghe doesn't let go for a long time.

Finally, he steps back. "Sit down, Binghe. Help this old man eat some of these."

Chapter End Notes

What- did you think SQQ wasn't going into the caves? Who ELSE is gonna save LQG come on. I cried so much writing this holy cow.

Anyway, come yell at me in the comments. :)

Cry sometimes while I'm lying in bed

Chapter Summary

I'm out of chapter titles so I'm regressing to the old standby of song lyrics.

Chapter warnings: Kleenex, canon typical violence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mu Qingfang hates to admit it, but the visits from Luo Binghe help a lot. Binghe seems to have developed his own schedule and shows up at Mu Qingfang's house about once a month. It gives him something to look forward to.

Fortunately, Shen Yuan had been a master at dissociation, and though he doesn't have a convenient internet here to keep him company, he's able to stay as busy as he feels like. If he wants to work himself ragged, he attends every clinic he can.

He visits the Warm Red Pavilion and has tea with Cheng Yi. She doesn't ask why he looks so sad. As soon as he mentions that Shen Qingqiu has entered seclusion, she knows. She offers no platitudes, nor words of comfort.

Instead, Cheng Yi tells him how she met Shen Jiu as a young girl. Ten slave children, sold off one by one. Shen Jiu found her again by accident, she reveals. She tells him about the time Liu Qingge burst into the brothel and dragged Shen Jiu back to the sect in shame.

She looks sternly at him over tea. "A-Jiu would not have brought you here if he didn't trust you. He would not have asked *me* to trust you with one of my girls. Mu Qingfang, we may not know his reasons, but he does have them. Please don't turn your mind against him while you wait."

He can't turn back time, nor can he smack Shen Qingqiu over the head with his own fan. What he *can* do, right now in fact, is help someone who needs it. Lai LiHua and her seven month old son Lai Zhaohui return with him to Qian Cao.

Wu Yanshin gapes in astonishment as the young woman holding a baby steps carefully down from Mu Qingfang's sword. "Wu Yanshin, this is Lai Lihua and her son." He glances down at the baby who grins at him. He's teething and chewing on his fingers, drooling happily. Lai Lihua is very good at sewing, and is willing to learn how to do laundry or cook. I'd appreciate it if you can get her set up on the peak?" He smiles, though it feels fake.

Yanshin's eyes soften. "Yes, Shizun." She says simply, then greets the young mother and the baby.

Mu Qingfang watches them walk away with an aching heart. He wants nothing more than to throw things and yell but he's past the acute phase of this pain. It's chronic now, and it's hard to remember what life was like when he was happy. It feels like forever ago.

Seasons change and the next thing Mu Qingfang knows it's New Years.

It's New Years and he has no one to celebrate with. He retreats to his house and hunkers down. He's just trying to get through each day, to be honest.

But time is relentless, and while it dulls the pain a little, Mu Qingfang is just left with so many *questions*! Why didn't Shen Qingqiu *tell* him that he was going to enter the Ling Xi caves? Why would he just kiss him like Mu Qingfang meant something to him, even say that he'll miss him! And then leave without a word.

He can't make sense of it.

Did they even have a relationship? Did Mu Qingfang make up the entire thing in his mind? Was all that time he spent with Shen Qingqiu meaningless?

By the time eighteen months has passed, Mu Qingfang has reconciled himself with the fact that he is *really fucking pissed off* at Shen Qingqiu. Like, he wants to punch him in the face nearly as much as he wants to kiss the man. He cuts those thoughts off, though. Because maybe this was Shen Qingqiu's way of telling him that it's over.

Thank god, Binghe keeps showing up every month with new treats. He stopped bringing the water chestnut cakes because it kept making Mu Qingfang cry. Binghe's gotten very good at osmanthus cakes, and lotus seed cakes, and spun sugar treats.

No longer a thin weedy kid, Luo Binghe has started a pretty major growth spurt. His hair has gotten a lot longer and shinier, and Binghe keeps it up in a tight ponytail. Sometimes he drags Ning Yingying along on his monthly mercy missions to Qian Cao peak.

Mu Qingfang celebrates the second year passing by getting extremely drunk. He flashes himself into the hidden room so he can drink without any busybodies barging into his house in the name of a wellness check. He pours his heart out to Xuan Zhen, even lighting the special incense that Shen Qingqiu had bought for him that day so long ago.

The incense burns down, and the wine jar is empty and Mu Qingfang still feels like *shit*. He has no answers, and at this point he's not even sure if he wants any. Xuan Zhen remains stubbornly silent on the matter.

As the second year marches on, Mu Qingfang makes himself progressively busier and busier until his disciples are all exchanging looks behind his back and even Binghe looks worried on his monthly visit.

With three months to go, Mu Qingfang is back to working full clinic days three to four times a week. He ignores messages from Shang Qinghua, and leaves his peak only to go on medical calls or peak lord meetings.

Is it bad that he misses when Liu Qingge and Shen Qingqiu were screaming at each other in meetings? It feels like a ghost town around here, and the two empty seats make Mu Qingfang feel like he's lost a tooth and can't stop sticking his tongue in the hole. Wherever he happens to look, there's an empty chair.

He doesn't stick around afterwards anymore, having no interest in making nice with anyone. Shang Qinghua tries to snag him one last time, and Mu Qingfang dodges him mercilessly.

One month left.

Hell breaks loose, all at once. Emergency talismans flare up everywhere, and the rainbow bridges shatter. Everyone with a sword is frantically trying to rescue disciples that happened to be on the bridge and were dangling from the cliffs helplessly.

Qi messenges come from the Hallmasters of Qing Jing peak alerting them to the presence of demons on Qiong Ding peak.

Mu Qingfang leaves Qian Cao with Wu Yanshin and Xie Yanmei and flies himself to Qiong Ding peak as fast as his sword can take him. He has no idea if Liu Qingge has survived his tribulation or in what kind of shape Shen Qingqiu might be in.

He swoops down and snatches two disciples from the cliffside. They were returning to Qiong Ding peak from Qian Cao, actually, having just completed the treatment for aphrodisiac poisoning. He scours the cliffs with his eyes after he deposits the disciples on the Qing Jing side of the bridge. He doesn't see anyone else who might have fallen from the bridge, so Mu Qingfang flies up to the peak itself.

It's pandemonium. Right now, he's on the opposite side of Qiong Ding from where the all important plaque is. Still there's demons everywhere, and he lets his needles fly with abandon. Mu Qingfang certainly hasn't been practicing any sword forms -Ha! A mistake in retrospect, but OG Qingfang's drive and determination saves him because his body just starts killing the shit out of some demons! His sword flashes, severing tendons while his needles render them paralyzed. If in doubt, sever the carotid artery just under the left ear, then dodge the blood spray.

He finds disciples down and checks them while keeping his eyes and senses open. He's able to stabilize two, but a third has already died.

The entire mountain shakes, and when Mu Qingfang looks up into the sky, it's raining swords. He blinks in disbelief, and starts running. What the hell is going on?!

By the time he gets to where the action *was* it's clear there's been a massacre. Wounded people are everywhere, and Liu Qingge and Shen Qingqiu, fresh from seclusion, are slaying demons left and right. Some kids from Qing Jing and Bai Zhan are there fighting too. Luo Binghe looks fine, and so does Ning Yingying.

The lords of Bai Zhan and Qing Jing peak work quickly together to kill the remaining demons. Liu Qingge opts to give chase for the ones attempting to flee down the mountain, and another massively powerful sword array forms in the sky, raining down hundreds of copies of Cheng Luan.

The Qiong Ding head disciple whose name always escapes Mu Qingfang sees him, and starts directing wounded his way. Fuck, why are there so many *burns*? He wonders. He knits skin back together, closes stab wounds, and slashes from swords. He's so busy in fact, that he's absolutely *shocked* when a familiar voice says from behind him, "Mu Shidi."

He straightens and turns, only to find Shen Qingqiu standing there, sword still in his right hand. Mu Qingfang swallows. He's waited for this moment for so long, but he just feels… empty. "Shen Shixiong," he greets with much more calm than he feels. "Are you injured?"

Frowning, Shen Qingqiu says, "No, but-"

"I'm afraid it will need to wait, Shixiong," Mu Qingfang says and he's not even lying. He turns back to his patient and keeps working. He's numb, he's so numb, this is fine, right? It's going to have to be.

Wu Yanshin and Xie Yanmei appear soon after to help with the mopping up.While Mu Qingfang was rescuing dangling disciples, they had gone straight to where the demons were and helped protect the younger disciples and non cultivators caught in the crossfire. They bring qiankun pouches full of fresh bandages and lots of pain medicine and calming teas.

Mu Qingfang would be lying if he said that he didn't have some kind of extrasensory awareness of exactly *where* Shen Qingqiu was at any given time now that they're in the same vicinity.

He kind of feels like Shen Shixiong wants to talk to him but you know what? It's *his* turn to wait. Mu Qingfang sets his jaw, and keeps working until he feels like he's going to collapse for real.

Except he *can't* because Yue Shixiong calls an emergent peak lord meeting once he gets back to the mountain. Fucking wonderful. He sends Yanshin and Yanmei back to Qian Cao peak to take care of the wounded who need ongoing care and observation, while he trudges to the meeting hall.

He doesn't realize until he sits down in his usual place that his hands are still filthy and bloodstained. He winces, and digs through his qiankun pouch for a clean bandage or something he can -

Someone hands him a white handkerchief, which he gratefully accepts. "Hey thanks," he says, turning his head and then finding himself face to face with Shen Qingqiu. *Of course*, his mind whispers. *These are your usual seats*.

He's not ready for this. He's just not. "Thank you," he says, and looks away.

Thankfully, Liu Qingge storms in. There's a dark maroon stain down the front of his white robes like he spit up blood some time recently. "How the hell did demons invade the sect?" he demands, slamming his body into a chair.

Wow. Mu Qingfang has missed his bluntness a LOT, actually.

Qi Qingqi, who is sitting to Mu Qingfang's right, is also filthy. Her hands are bleeding, so he leans over and passes her some qi, to make the skin close. She nods her thanks. He tries to surreptitiously glance at Shen Shixiong to see if he's hurt or not. There are no obvious wounds, but. Mu Qingfang chews his lip. He doesn't even know if Shen Qingqiu would welcome his fussing anymore.

Everyone starts talking at once, and Mu Qingfang tunes everybody and everything *out*. He clasps his hands on the table and stares blankly ahead. Next to him, Shen Qingqiu breathes in and out and it takes everything in Mu Qingfang to *not* turn and just drink in his face. Across the table, he feels Shang Qinghua's eyes on him.

The entire meeting passes in a blur, and once again after it's over, Mu Qingfang doesn't feel like hanging around and playing nice. He would like to actually wash his hands, for one thing. The smell of phantom blood is stuck in his nose. He keeps his head down so he doesn't have to meet anyone's gaze and draws his sword once he's outside.

"What's wrong with you," Liu Qingge demands from *right* behind him and Mu Qingfang is not in the mood for jump scares!

"What do you mean?" Mu Qingfang says cautiously, while Liu Shixiong tilts his head to the side and just…frowns.

"Why do you look so bad?" The War God asks, apparently in all seriousness.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?" Mu Qingfang snarls, and Liu Qingge's eyes widen. "Because some of us have been *working* every day, and we didn't just fuck off to cultivate without telling anyone!"

"But I…did tell you?" Liu Qingge says slowly, like he's dealing with a wild animal that might attack at any moment.

Mu Qingfang takes a very deep breath and lets it out. He repeats this three more times. When he opens his eyes, Liu Qingge is still standing there watching him carefully. "Tomorrow. Come to the Healing Pavilion and get checked out." He steps onto his sword and gets the fuck off Qiong Ding peak.

He doesn't bother going home, but lands directly at the Healing Pavilion. He visits each of the victims of the demon attack, gives them a quick exam and some kind words. Wu Yanshin and Xie Yanmei are both still working in the wards taking care of the many patients and he checks in with them too.

"How are you two holding up?" Mu Qingfang asks when he finally gets the two women to stop for a few minutes.

Wu Yanshin just glares at him. "*We're* fine," she says, "But you're going home where you will sleep."

"No excuses anymore, Shizun," Xie Yanmei adds. "Do not even *think* about coming to any clinics this week, either." Yanmei gives him a ferocious glare and then stalks off, presumably to see more patients.

That leaves Wu Yanshin and Mu Qingfang alone in his office.

"Have you thought about what you want to say to him?" Yanshin asks quietly.

Mu Qingfang presses his lips together for a moment. "I'm not sure what there is to say," he says. He misses A-Jiu. Misses the way he would just come in and flop on the bed. The way he would crawl up and demand cuddles without saying any words to that effect.

Part of Mu Qingfang wants to go to Qing Jing peak. Pretend like everything's okay. But it's not. The other part of him wishes he was the kind of person that could get over someone by getting under someone else. But he doesn't work that way, no matter how much he might wish. Besides everything else aside, he doesn't even know if Shen Qingqiu feels the same. Maybe entering a three year seclusion without telling Mu Qingfang was just Shen Qingqiu's way of making his wishes known.

"Get some rest," He tells her, and she catches him by the arm.

"Take your own advice, Shizun," Wu Yanshin says seriously.

He walks home practically with his eyes closed at this point. On autopilot, he pushes his door open and heads straight for the table. He sits down and rests his head in his hands.

"You look terrible."

Mu Qingfang jerks in the chair and nearly topples over. He blinks, and then blinks again. "Shen Shixiong," he says mechanically. Shen Qingqiu is in his kitchen, leaning on the counter. Okay!

He watches Shen Qingqiu come over and sit down in his (former) usual seat. He rests his hands on the table and watches Mu Qingfang carefully.

"A-Yuan."

The name hits him like a bullet to the heart. Mu Qingfang hasn't heard his *own name* in *three* years. "I'm going to bed," he announces. "You can stay. Or go." He walks to his bedroom without looking back.

He undresses mechanically, dropping his robes on the floor. He pulls the crown from his hair roughly, setting it on the night table. Then he extinguishes the candles, gets under the covers and squeezes his eyes shut while tears leak down his cheeks.

Footsteps padding through the house. The sound of someone removing robes. Then, "A-Yuan…can I?"

If Mu Qingfang says a word, Shen Qingqiu will hear the tears in his voice. But he's *here*, and Mu Qingfang has missed him *so* much. "Yeah," he says finally, second and third guessing himself.

So Shen Qingqiu climbs in the bed a little hesitantly and he lays on his side facing Mu Qingfang. Carefully, Shen Qingqiu reaches out in the dark and wipes away the tears on his face. "I'm *sorry*," he says at last, an anguished whisper. "I didn't think-"

"No shit," Mu Qingfang says. "*That* part came through loud and clear. Do you even…?" His throat is too tight for this. "I'm trying to sleep," he says when he can say words again.

"Can I hold you?" Shen Qingqiu asks, in a voice that's much too small for such a powerful man.

Maybe Mu Qingfang's an idiot, but he remembers when he thought for sure that Shen Qingqiu was going to stop talking to him completely when he confessed that Binghe was part demon. "Okay…A-Jiu," he says, and next to him Shen Qingqiu lets out a deep breath.

Shen Qingqiu wraps his arms around Mu Qingfang like he's made of glass, and Mu Qingfang settles in against the other man's chest. Shen Qingqiu noses at his hair, and kisses his head. Slowly the tension drains from both men. Mu Qingfang slips into a kind of half awake-half asleep dozy state, in which his mind-for once- has gone oddly quiet. Under his ear, Shen Qingqiu's heart beats rapidly. He's no closer to sleep than Mu Qingfang is.

Mu Qingfang startles awake the next morning, and then jumps in fright when something moves next to him. "Fuck," he mutters, rubbing his eyes. He forgot Shen Qingqiu slept here. Mu Qingfang gets up, and considers getting dressed, before he remembers that he never took a bath last night and is still disgusting. He contemplates waking Shen Qingqiu up, but reconsiders when he realizes that means they'll have to *talk* about things. Nope! Mu Qingfang is drained dry, and has no emotional strength for that.

He takes clothes with him and walks through to the bathing chamber. Indoor plumbing is a delightful perk of being a Peak Lord. Mu Qingfang takes full advantage and runs a scalding hot bath. Too scalding in fact- he ends up having to add a little cool water so he can step in.

Sinking into the frankly large and decadent tub (he's never telling Airplane that these things are freaking fantastic), he rests the back of his neck on the rounded edge of the tub, leaving his hair to dangle over the side. How his sister would laugh if she knew he was here living another life, struggling with thick, waist length hair on the regular.

Meimei would probably love teaching him all the fancy braids and fishtails or whatever she used to use-

"Do you want help with your hair?" Shen Qingqiu asks, and Mu Qingfang jumps, sending water sloshing over the side of the tub.

"If you want," Mu Qingfang says, looking straight ahead.

Shen Qingqiu retrieves a pitcher from the nearby shelves, and then brings back two large jars of rice water. He fills the pitcher from the bath. “You’ll need to lean forward.”

Mu Qingfang scoots up and wraps his arms around his knees. He still feels curiously numb about everything. Strange.

“Tilt your head back,” Shen Qingqiu says quietly, and then pours the water over Mu Qingfang’s head, soaking his hair. He works the bath bean between his palms, working up a lather, and then starts scrubbing Mu Qingfang’s hair, spreading the soap down the long locks.

Once he’s finished with the washing, he has Mu Qingfang tilt back again so he can pour the rice water over until the soap is all rinsed out.

“A-Yuan,” Shen Qingqiu says softly. “*Talk* to me, *please*.”

Mu Qingfang should say that he’s angry. That’s he’s so very *hurt*. But his throat is locked up and he can’t find the right words. Isn’t it better to remain silent than to say something he’ll regret? No, he decides. He needs to say *something*.

“I’m having a hard time,” Mu Qingfang says finally, and focuses on washing his body. It’s easier maybe, that Shen Qingqiu is behind him. He’s not sure he could get through this conversation if he had to look at him. “I’m…*angry* that you didn’t tell me you were entering seclusion. It made me feel worthless, that you couldn’t even bother to tell me.”

Oh, what is this, an emotion? Oh, *fuck*. Mu Qingfang…he’s *really* fucking *angry*. He starts scrubbing his skin furiously. He finishes quickly, and stands up, deciding he doesn’t care that he’s naked. He turns his head, glaring at Shen Qingqiu.

But Shen Qingqiu- he’s…

On his knees with his head pressed to the floor. “Shixiong begs forgiveness.”

Mu Qingfang steps out of the tub, and retrieves a bath sheet from the shelf, wrapping it around himself. “Get up, A-Jiu,” he says finally.

Shen Qingqiu sits back and Mu Qingfang sees him clearly for the first time today. He’s thinner than he was before he entered the caves and his skin is too pale. Dark bruises mar the skin under his eyes, and his eyes…

“You look like shit,” Mu Qingfang says.

Shen Qingqiu huffs a little and crosses his arms over his chest. “Does Mu Shidi wish to check my meridians?”

He does in fact! Shen Qingqiu extends his wrist. Mu Qingfang…*intends* to just lay his fingertips against Shen Qinqqiu’s skin. Instead he wraps his fingers completely around his wrist and *tugs*.

Shen Qingqiu closes the distance between them and Mu Qingfang wraps his arms around his waist. He tucks his face into Shen Qingqiu’s neck. Strong arms hold him like a vice, pressing

him close into Shen Qingqiu's body.

The sect is still in shambles. There's more than a few dead disciples, and the rainbow bridges have been shattered. Mu Qingfang has a fuck ton of work to do today. He and Shen Qingqiu need to really talk about stuff.

He's still angry and hurt.

But Shen Qingqiu is *here*, he came home to Mu Qingfang, and he's *trying*. For now, it's enough.

Chapter End Notes

Wu Yanshin: Shizun is bringing back sex workers and babies now?
Wu Yanshin: He's smiling though.
Wu Yanshin:...I approve, actually.

LQG to SQQ: Mu Shidi is so mad at you he yelled at ME. NOT OKAY
SQQ: I am prepared to grovel

Head's up: I am having my parents to my house this weekend for fathers day and since I have 5 cats I will be cleaning until the end of time. May not get around to updating until Monday!

I hope this chapter was satisfying-I was really trying to show that depression isn't just magically fixed, like. MQF/SY has been spiraling in his head for 3 freaking years! It's gonna take some time for him to trust SQQ again.

Come tell me what you think!

Just to get it all out, what's in my head

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: accidental slut shaming (whoops)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mu Qingfang dries his hair with qi and then combs it out until it's smooth while Shen Qingqiu is in the bath. Mu Qingfang thinks again of his baby sister while he puts his hair up. Maybe he can ask Yanshin to teach him how to braid one's own hair. It seems like it requires a lot of upper arm strength.

He wanders out into the house and busies himself making tea. He doesn't feel like eating anything. Hasn't for a while, if he's being honest. Inedia is easy enough to practice. A small smile touches his lips when he thinks about Luo Binghe's Monthly Mercy Missions to bring him sweets and visit.

Mu Qingfang hopes that the boy will still come by. Watching the Protagonist grow up to be strong and healthy is nice.

"I should probably return to Qing Jing peak." Shen Qingqiu says quietly.

Mu Qingfang startles, nearly burning himself. He shakes the droplets of tea off his hand and with a thought, the small red burns heal over. "I'm sure you have a lot to do," he says mildly. He forces himself to meet Shen Qingqiu's eyes.

Shen Qingqiu presses his lips together. "A-Yuan….there's many things I want to say-"

Forcing himself not to interrupt, or glare or shout is hard. Mu Qingfang unclenches his hands, and makes himself concentrate on the mechanics of breathing. Pull the diaphragm *down*, force air into the lungs. Push the diaphragm *up*, force the air out.

"I….wasn't thinking clearly the day I entered seclusion. Even…even when I left you that morning, I was not sure I was going to."

Mu Qingfang stares at his counter.

"And-" Shen Qingqiu takes a deep breath and then sighs deeply. "I…told myself that you would be fine, that we had no formal relationship-"

Okay, *what*? "You slept in my bed!" Mu Qingfang says, in disbelief, as a cold wave crashes over him.

“Mu Shidi has had many people sleep in his bed,” Shen Qingqiu says, and then his eyes widen like he’s shocked at his own words.

“Get out, *right now*,” Mu Qingfang says. “You need to leave before I do or say something I will regret.” He stares at the floor. “I can’t believe you made me fall in love with you,” he mutters. “I hate being this fucking *stupid*.”

Shen Qingqiu makes a distressed sound in his throat, and when Mu Qingfang raises his eyes to glare at him, he finds the other man looking pale and *shocked*. “I didn’t know,” Shen Qingqiu whispers. “A-Y-”

“You can’t call me that right after you tell me that you thought *I have had many people in my bed*! Because for *me*, the only person who has ever been in *my* bed, is *you*.” Mu Qingfang snarls.

Shen Qingqiu swallows, then nods. “As you wish.”

Looking at the ceiling, Mu Qingfang *laughs*. “What I wish, is that you cared enough to tell me you were thinking of doing a three year long seclusion. I *wish* I was more than an afterthought. You know what? The next time you try to give me an explanation, maybe write a fucking *letter*. Because right now, I don’t see how you’re treating me any better than Yue Qingyuan treated you for all those years.”

Lips parted, eyes wide, Shen Qingqiu nods very slowly. He walks out without another word.

Okay, Mu Qingfang thinks. This is fine. Mechanically he drinks his tea. Then he pushes the past twenty four hours deep into a little box in his mind, and shoves it away. He has work to do.

Wu Yanshin looks like she hasn’t slept. He orders her to rest for at least twelve hours before returning. She tries to argue, but then takes a good look at his face, and says simply, “Yes, Shizun.”

“Good girl,” he murmurs.

He visits the patients who survived the demon attack. Apparently the demons had some kind of weapon that used demonic energy that was so disruptive to human flesh the resulting wounds looked like burns, although it was probably more accurate to say that the underlying flesh was simply…disintegrated. Anyway, he treats them like burns. The underlying principles of wound healing are the same.

Xie Yanmei is busy calming down some of the younger disciples who had fallen from the bridge as it collapsed. They’d had terrible nightmares, and Mu Qingfang finds her with a young female disciple weeping in her arms. Xie Yanmei murmurs to her, and runs a hand over her head as she cries. When Yanmei glances up at him, her eyes are filled with sympathetic tears. Mu Qingfang gives her a nod of acknowledgement and moves on, giving them privacy.

One disciple had his arm yanked from its socket by a demon. Fortunately, Wu Yanshin had been nearby when it happened, and immediately preserved the limb and stopped the bleeding. Over night, she had spent a *significant* amount of time reattaching the arm and ensuring that it received adequate perfusion.

More than a few disciples sustained concussions in the battle and there were lots of severe sprains and minor broken bones from falling off the bridge and slamming into the mountainside or trees.

It occurs to Mu Qingfang that he should probably go to Qiong Ding peak and check on the disciples that were triaged at the scene and deemed not hurt enough to come to Qian Cao since they had so many critical patients to care for.

As he flies overhead, he nearly runs into a bunch of Bai Zhan disciples who are apparently providing airspace security. Mu Qingfang silently reminds himself he can't fly on autopilot, not today.

Underneath him, An Ding and Ku Xing disciples are busy rebuilding the rainbow bridges. He sees Shang Qinghua scurrying around down there directing people. The Ku Xing disciples are using layers of talisman to lay the groundwork for the bridge while the An Ding people somehow pour qi into them, slowly creating beams of multicolored light that float in the air. Mu Qingfang watches, fascinated, as they maneuver the blocks of rainbow to interlock with each other. The bridge slowly begins reforming from Qiong Ding over to Qing Jing.

Personally, Mu Qingfang thinks it's a little more important for folks to be able to get to *his* peak, but what does he know? He's just a fucking *doctor*. He makes a mental note to check on the workers later because they look like they are expending huge amounts of qi in this endeavor.

Qiong Ding peak is a mess, naturally. He finds a large pile of dead demons being burned, an extensive array containing the stench and smoke, sending it high up into the atmosphere. Every disciple he runs into has one hand on their sword and anxious eyes.

Mu Qingfang needs to check his download for information about Xianxia ways to treat PTSD because it sure looks like everyone has it!

Someone has set up a satellite healing tent, like the ones he uses for clinic days. Mu Qingfang finds Wei Xuiying there checking wounds, treating exhaustion and generally providing moral support.

Wei Xuiying looks up from the disciple she's talking to. "Shizun," she greets.

"Hello," he answers. "Have you been here all night?"

"Yes, Shizun," Wei Xuiying says. "Wu Da-Shijie, and Xie Shijie returned to Qian Cao with the most severely wounded last night, but there were so many here that just needed…" She shrugs. "Help."

Mu Qingfang pats her on the head. “Good girl. Go get some sleep. This old man will take over while you rest.”

It’s easy to not think about his problems when he can think about someone else's! Yes! Give him some shit he can *fix* and he is *on it!* Time passes quickly and he finds himself listening to people expressing their grief and anger. Let’s not think about how much he is personally relating to that, all right? Even as he gently tells people it is okay to feel how they’re feeling, Mu Qingfang feels like a fraud.

Other people can feel things! Not A-Yuan! A-Yuan gets to suck it the fuck up! Conceal, don’t feel! It’s working *great* for him really.

At dusk he flies back to Qian Cao. The bridge connecting Qian Cao to Bai Zhan, An Ding, Ku Xing and Xian Shu is still down. Sure but let’s make sure Yue Qingyuan can walk across his bridge to visit Shen Qingqiu, though.

Oooh, he thinks at himself. Bitter! Mu Qingfang lets himself in his house. He succeeds in not thinking about the things ~~people~~ he doesn’t want to think about until he gets into bed and smells jasmine on the pillow next to him.

Admitting defeat, he pulls it close to his chest and breathes in Shen Qingqiu’s scent. Something is definitely wrong with Mu Qingfang because as angry as he is with Shen Qingqiu, he wishes he was *here* just as much.

He wakes the next morning feeling tired and drained. A headache already pounds at his temples. Maybe he should actually eat something today? He had such odd dreams. Luo Binghe was there and Mu Qingfang feels like Shen Qingqiu was there too although he can’t swear to it. Something about the way Binghe grew up? He has a vague memory of watching Binghe’s mother die. Poor kid.

While Mu Qingfang makes tea, he tries to imagine a scenario in which Shen Qingqiu actually does write him a letter. He snorts. Unpossible! He smiles without humor. Shen Qingqiu really had *no idea* that Mu Qingfang was in love with him? Come on.

He takes his tea and leaves the house, following the path up the low hill to the garden. He hasn’t been out here as much as he would like to. He opens the gate and visits his demon plants. Mu Qingfang misses the days when just messing with the garden was enough to make him happy.

It feels like he hasn’t been happy in a long time.

The tea is long gone when he gets back to the house. Mu Qingfang finishes getting dressed and then heads out to the Healing Pavilion.

The next days run together in a blur. Mu Qingfang keeps himself so busy in fact that he doesn’t have time to mope!

He's just getting ready to leave his house one morning when someone knocks on the door. There's no anticipation, just mild curiosity at this point. He's more than a little surprised when he finds Luo Binghe on his doorstep.

"Binghe, come in." Mu Qingfang steps back. "How have you been?"

"Answering Shishu, this disciple is fine." Luo Binghe's expression is pinched.

"Oh, really?" Mu Qingfang asks, crossing his arms over his chest. "Why is Shizhi being so distant? Are we not close?"

And then, a strange look of relief passes over the young man's face. "Mu Shishu, forgiveness. I-The last few days have been…hard."

"Would you like to sit? I can make more tea?" Mu Qingfang offers.

Luo Binghe sighs. "I must return to Qing Qing peak soon." He purses his lips and then says, "Shizun asked me to deliver something to you."

Mu Qingfang blinks a few times. He…did? Mu Qingfang wants to stomp out the little curl of hope in his chest. "Okay…"

The Protagonist produces a box from a qiankun pouch. "Mu Shishu should know that this disciple had nothing to do with whatever is in there."

Mu Qingfang's eyebrows shoot to his hairline. The corner of his mouth lifts. "All right."

Stubbornly Luo Binghe continues. "I just wanted to let Shishu know in case they were below standard." He sighs. "Forgiveness, but I must return."

"Thank you, Binghe. It's always good to see you." Mu Qingfang says honestly taking the offered box.

For the first time today, Luo Binghe gives him a bright smile. "I hope to be able to visit soon, Shishu." He bows and leaves.

Carefully, Mu Qingfang opens the box. The smell hits his nose before he understands what he's looking at.

Water chestnut cakes. A little lumpy, a little lopsided and a little scorched at the corners. Tied up with a string is a rolled up stack of papers.

Mu Qingfang sits down and unrolls the letter. He's greeted with perfect calligraphy, and his stomach flips over sideways.

Did Shen Qingqiu actually write him a letter?

Shen Yuan,

First an explanation of sorts in the hope you will see fit to read the rest of the letter.

I have lived near the entirety of my life alone, eschewing contact with most people. At every turn, I have been abandoned by the people who should have cared for me, and the ones who promised they would.

When I said we had no formal agreement, it did not mean that I didn't want one. Some questions I still don't know how to ask, and certain subjects I have no real world experience in.
What I do have experience in, is having even the mildest hope crushed. To learn this from a young age places an indelible mark upon one's soul.

How is such a man to bring up a subject of a three year absence?

It is here I must offer an apology-I entirely misspoke when I said that Mu Shidi was known to have many people in his bed. I regret those words and would strike them from your memory if I could.

There is no simple explanation I can give you, A-Yuan, because looking back my thoughts make no sense. At the time I did not want to have to say goodbye to you, to see disappointment on your face, or worse, see none at all. I deluded myself into thinking that your affections were not as deep as mine.

For you to speak that you loved me, even as a past tense…A-Yuan, I have never heard those words directed at myself before. To even hope that you returned my feelings seemed impossible, like something out of a dream.

Because of this selfish failure on my part, I hurt you more than I ever thought possible, and I will regret those actions until the end of my days.

In summation, this Qingqiu has a deep and lasting affection for Shen Yuan. This Qingqiu would gladly court Shen Yuan with the goal of a permanent romantic relationship. This Qingqiu begs for the opportunity to show Shen Yuan his steadfastness, a chance to make up for the pain his actions have caused.

If it pleases Shen Yuan, then wherever and whenever is convenient, this Qingqiu would gladly meet.

Shen Qingqiu

Oh, Mu Qingfang thinks. He slumps in the chair, hardly daring to recognize the emotion in his chest. He folds the letter carefully, tucking it in between the folds of his robes, close to his heart.

He checks in at the Healing Pavilion. The wounded disciples are healing well and most of them should be able to return to their peaks, if they have a sword that is. The ones who have not yet claimed a spiritual sword will have to be ferried back.

It just so happens that Mu Qingfang spies one of the younger disciples of Qing Jing peak in one of his beds. He ducks out of the ward and finds Xie Yanmei in her office. “Yanmei, is Qin Wencheng ready to be discharged?”

Xie Yanmei looks up from her paperwork. “Yes, Shizun. She had minor burns on her arm and they have healed nicely. She’s just waiting for someone from Shen Shibo’s peak to take her home.”

Mu Qingfang says, “I can fly her back.”

Xie Yanmei arches an eyebrow. “Oh ho,” she says, folding her arms over her chest. “Has he groveled sufficiently, then?”

“No comment,” Mu Qingfang says, feeling his cheeks heat.

“Well,” Xie Yanmei offers, “It’s been a while since you looked so lively.” Her expression hardens. “Shen Shibo better not fuck this up,” she warns, and *that’s* his signal to leave!

He introduces himself to Qin Wencheng. She’s a girl of around fourteen and Mu Qingfang only recognizes her name because Luo Binghe had been absolutely thrilled not to be the youngest disciple on the peak anymore. “Qin Shizhi,” he says, “This Shishu can take you back to Qing Jing peak.”

She brightens, obviously wanting to be released. Someone already brought her a set of Qing Jing peak robes, and she’s ready to go. It’s a short flight, and he drops her off right near the disciple dormitories.

For the first time in three years, Mu Qingfang approaches the bamboo house. He ascends the steps, heart rabbiting in his chest and knocks on the door. If his heart rate doesn’t slow down soon, Mu Qingfang’s going to be in danger of passing out if he attempts to exert himself at all. He raises a finger and presses under his jaw. Huh -one hundred fifty. Impressive!

Is Shen Qingqiu not at home? Of course, he is probably busy with the rebuilding effort or else visiting Yue Qingyuan. Mu Qingfang lets out a disappointed breath. He turns around, and stops.

Shen Qingqiu is at the bottom of the steps, one hand on the railing and staring in disbelief. “Mu Shidi-I. I wasn’t expecting you.”

Frowning, Mu Qingfang says, “I can come back if this time is not-”

“No!” Shen Qingqiu presses his lips together. “Now is…*good*.” He ascends the steps, gaze meeting Mu Qingfang’s the entire time. “Please. Come in.”

Chapter End Notes

I really have my clown makeup on today. I cleaned the worst of stuff. And then was like if I don't get through the worst of this I am gonna be stressed about it.

Tomorrow will be busy for me (Mom and Dad visiting) so no promises for an update!

At least I leave you guys on a positive direction this time! Come tell me what you think!

LBH: Oh shit, I'm a demon

LBH: Also, I DID NOT MAKE THESE CAKES! They are not *perfect* and that is UNACCEPTABLE

SQQ: OMG I fucked up so much worse than I thought
SQQ: Binghe, come here, I need to make something for Mu Shishu
LBH: Uh, did you not remember that I'm
SQQ: Whatever, that's OLD NEWS, I need to learn how to bake IMMEDIATELY

I'm feeling a little peculiar

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: None I can think of.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sometimes Mu Qingfang wishes for background music, something soft and gentle, like they'd play on a drama during the heartfelt reveal. When he follows Shen Qingqiu into the bamboo house, mostly he's struck by the silence. It hardly feels lived in anymore.

The acacia bowl that he'd given to Shen Qingqiu so long ago is sitting on the table, the lavender infused wax solid within its confines. Mu Qingfang takes a seat at the table, and after a moment, Shen Qingqiu sits down next to him, adjusting his chair so his body is turned toward Mu Qingfang's.

Mu Qingfang lets his gaze wander over Shen Qingqiu's face. The last few times he's seen him…he'd kind of been avoiding meeting his eyes as much as possible. To do so now, after reading his letter, feels…unbearably intimate.

"You read my letter." Shen Qingqiu says carefully. His hands rest on his knees, clenching and releasing the fabric of his robes.

"Yes. I…it helped," Mu Qingfang tells him honestly.

It's Shen Qingqiu's turn to search his face. "Mu Shidi…I meant everything I wrote." he hesitantly reaches out, then withdraws like he was burned. "Can I…hold your hand?"

Slowly, Mu Qingfang nods. It feels like they're both so afraid of disrupting this fragile understanding they're both trying to build. He reaches out, and long fingers tangle with his, threading together until their palms are flat against each other.

"I was a slave until I was nearly sixteen," Shen Qingqiu says. His dark green eyes are piercing. "My mother abandoned me as an infant. Qi-ge promised me he would come for me, and then *didn't*. From the first moment I came to this sect people hated me, called me scum. I could not call anyone *friend*. And I believed for a long time, that if I just died of a qi deviation one day in my house, not one person here would notice or care."

Looking down into his lap, Shen Qingqiu says, "I tell you this, not to feel sorry for me. But, rather….how would I know how to handle getting everything I never knew to wish for?" He raises his eyes to meet Mu Qingfang's. "I should have told you about my intentions to enter the caves. My…insecurity… led me to hurt you and I deeply regret that."

Shen Qingqiu leans over in his chair until his forehead is touching Mu Qingfang's hand.

Slowly, carefully, Mu Qingfang reaches out and lays his other hand on Shen Qingqiu's head. "Shixiong," he says. "Would you make us some tea?"

Shen Qingqiu lifts his head, and Mu Qingfang's hand on his head falls away. He blinks. "Of. Of course."

Mu Qingfang uses this time to breathe and process. Shen Qingqiu's letter and explanation has gone a long way to soothing his pain. He feels properly awake and in his body for the first time in a long time. An apology doesn't erase the hurt though, and an explanation is not a magic pill. Mu Qingfang still has cracks in his heart, and although they feel like they're filling in …. It's still going to take time to heal completely.

He gets up from his chair and follows Shen Qingqiu into his small kitchen. Shen Qingqiu stiffens, but Mu Qingfang comes up behind him, pressing his chest into Shen Qingqiu's back and wrapping his arms around the other man's waist. Mu Qingfang closes his eyes, and breathes. "I missed you so much," he says.

A squeeze on his hands, then Shen Qingqiu turns in place, wrapping his arms around Mu Qingfang and holding him tight. "Mu Shidi-"

Mu Qingfang makes a sound of displeasure. "Say my *name*."

"Shen Yuan," Shen Qingqiu murmurs. "A-Yuan. *Beloved*."

Behind them, on the counter the tea grows cold.

With every minute in Shen Qingqiu's arms, Mu Qingfang feels himself healing. *Oxytocin* he thinks. Bonding hormones released during hugs, promoting well being. "Oh," he says, realizing. Before Shen Qingqiu came out of seclusion the last time someone hugged him was Binghe, at the first visit.

He's been starved of touch.

"What is it?" Shen Qingqiu murmurs into his hair. He leans back but doesn't let go.

Mu Qingfang shrugs a little. "I just realized I've been kind of, uh. Touch starved." At Shen Qingqiu's blank expression, Mu Qingfang explains, "People that aren't touched enough can get-depressed, disconnected. If you do that to babies, they don't-"

Shen Qingqiu presses his lips together.

Oh.

Mu Qingfang cups his cheek. "Skin to skin contact is important for mental and emotional health. Touch releases hormones that make us feel better." He hesitates and then adds, "Babies that don't get enough touch often fail to thrive. They can even die from lack of touch."

Shen Qingqiu closes his eyes and releases a long breath. “Just another way I’m deficient.”

“We. We can, um. Work on it. If you want,” Mu Qingfang says, finishing in a rush. He strokes his thumb over Shen Qingqiu’s cheekbone. Cheekbones are very close to lips, as it turns out, and the next thing he knows, he’s running his thumb over Shen Qingqiu’s lower lip.

Then they’re kissing, as gently and carefully as they did the first time. This time, it’s not a precursor to sex that has to happen so one of them doesn’t *die*. It just…feels good. Mu Qingfang lets his body follow his instincts, lapping at Shen Qingqiu’s lip, and then stroking their tongues together.

Mu Qingfang loses all track of time, lost in how *good* it feels to finally, finally have Shen Qingqiu back in his arms. Eventually the kisses slow down and they’re able to part. “A-Jiu,” he says. “Can I touch your skin?” Shen Qingqiu looks a little lost, so Mu Qingfang clarifies. “I want to feel your skin under my hands. I want to rub the muscles in your back and neck. I want to kiss between your shoulder blades. I want you to do the same to me, if you want.”

Frowning a little, Mu Qingfang adds, “I don’t…seem to want sex a lot. Once in a while maybe, but. I want *you*. Does that make sense?”

To his surprise, Shen Qingqiu is nodding. “I actually understand *completely*,” he says with some relief. Then he adds for good measure, “I like touching you. I like the way you touch me.” His brows draw down. “I never believed I could want *anyone*, until I met *you*. But. I don’t know if…” He straightens. “Yes, you can touch my skin.”

Mu Qingfang remembers vaguely being under the influence of aphrodisiac poison. This isn’t like that at *all*. He watches Shen Qingqiu shed his layers of robes, while Mu Qingfang strips down until he’s bare of all but his trousers.

Once he’s ready, Shen Qingqiu lays down on his stomach and Mu Qingfang kneels over his hips. He starts by running his hands over Shen Qingqiu’s back with light pressure, becoming firmer as he gets warmed up.

Pausing to move the thick silken hair away from Shen Qingqiu’s neck, Mu Qingfang leans down and kisses his neck. Then he uses his thumbs to feel all the knots in his neck, adding a little qi here and there to press them away.

Shen Qingqiu’s shoulders feel like cement, like one large slab of pain. Mu Qingfang uses qi for this part too, helping the muscles relax just enough so he can feel individual knots. There’s so many- there’s no way this isn’t extremely painful.

“Your shoulders and neck are all knotted up,” Mu Qingfang says. “Would you like me to try and get some out? The only thing is I can’t promise it won’t hurt a bit.”

Turning his head to the side, Shen Qingqiu says, “Do as you wish.”

“A-Jiu.” Mu Qingfang says simply. This is not punishment, and he’s not going any further until-

“Yes, you may. Was that clear enough?” Shen Qingqiu sighs.

Mu Qingfang finds the largest knot, right at the junction of Shen Qingqiu’s right shoulder and neck. Warming his fingertips, he presses two fingers around the border of the knot. “Breathe, A-Jiu,” Mu Qingfang says. Slowly, he gets it to loosen and break up a little.

Then he gets to work on the other side.

When Mu Qingfang is done, he thinks Shen Qingqiu might be asleep. So he settles down next to him. To his surprise, Shen Qingqiu opens his eyes.

Blinking sleepily, Shen Qingqiu says, “Why do I feel…drugged?”

A curl of warmth unfurls in Mu Qingfang’s chest. “Because it feels good to be touched,” he says. “That’s the feel good hormones our bodies release when we’re touched by other people.”

Curling onto his side facing Mu Qingfang, Shen Qingqiu reaches out for Mu Qingfang’s hand. He starts massaging his palm and fingers, especially the thick muscular pad at the base of his thumb. “I don’t really know how to do this,” he says. “But I want to learn.”

It’s a study in intimacy, Mu Qingfang will think later. For now, though, he savors every touch, every kiss, every moment. It feels like they’re cocooned in their own little world, until one of Mu Qingfang’s emergency talismans starts alarming.

“Shit!” Mu Qingfang jumps out of bed, and frantically throws his robes on. “I have to get to Qian Cao, somethings wrong with another peak lord!”

Shen Qingqiu sits up in the bed, still looking a little muzzy headed. “Go. I’ll see you soon.” He gets up while Mu Qingfang struggles with his boots and quickly ties his hair back in a ponytail.

Boots on, Mu Qingfang gives him a kiss on the cheek and runs.

His sword is out before the door is shut and then he’s in the air, flying at full speed. He lands right in front of the Healing Pavilion and barrells in the doors. “I’m here!”

“Shizun! Hallway three, room two!” Wu Yanshin shouts.

Racing down through the corridors, he arrives at the treatment room to find Shang Qinghua in the midst of a qi deviation, blood all down his front, and dripping from his nose and the corners of his eyes.

Mu Qingfang spares a few precious seconds to center himself. He breathes. Then steps forward. He presses his hand against Shang Qinghua’s chest. A scan shows the deviation was

caused by prolonged dehydration, malnutrition and exhaustion. His meridians aren't that badly aligned, it's just his qi is all used up from keeping his body from falling apart in its depleted state.

Pumping qi into his system, he says, "Yanshin, diagnosis?"

"Overwork, Shizun. Shang Shibo has been working non stop for days helping to rebuild the bridges. He's so dehydrated that he was confused. He was incoherent and mumbling about books and immortal demons. Then he suffered severe muscle cramps. That's when his head disciple called us. We were able to transport him here but then Shibo started deviating. Shizun- it was so…sudden."

So probably sodium and potassium deficiency. Mu Qingfang adjusts his qi to specifically provide those specialized nutrients. "Yanshin, can you take over keeping his meridians straight? I'm handling the electrolytes before he starts seizing."

At once, Wu Yanhisn adjusts her grip and begins transfusing qi to shore up Shang Qinghua's collapsing cultivation system. Like a balloon without air, if there's no qi, it leaves very little to sustain a cultivator, especially if they've been driving themselves past all sane limits.

Shang Qinghua's heart rate is too rapid and irregular, another problem with electrolyte derangements. His kidneys are also not happy. Mu Qingfang splits his concentration and forces Shang Qinghua's heart to slow down enough so that it can pump blood more effectively.

Wu Yanshin's efforts are helping a great deal, thank all the gods, and as his meridians stop spasming, Mu Qingfang feels Shang Qinghua's own qi here and there trying to help him. The tiny sparks of qi guide Mu Qingfang's attention right to where it needs to go.

Oh! Shang Qinghua *also* has an ulcer in his stomach! Has he been vomiting as well as not eating, drinking or sleeping?

This idiot! Mu Qingfang hurriedly finds the hole in Shang Qinghua's stomach lining and knits it back together using his spiritual energy. Realizing that he better do a more comprehensive scan, Mu Qingfang explores the man's entire digestive system, searching for more problems. He finds a few places in his small intestine where the mucosal walls have thinned dangerously and hastily shores those up as well.

Shang Qinghua's pancreas, liver and spleen seem to be working fine, fortunately.

As soon as possible, Mu Qingfang forces Shang Qinghua to wake. Airplane blinks blearily. "Mu Shidi?"

"Yanshin, please bring us some salty broth." Mu Qingfang requests. "Shang Shixiong. You nearly died. You suffered a qi deviation on top of severe dehydration. You also had a bleeding ulcer in your stomach."

"Oh, is that why it hurt so much for me to eat? Haha." Shang Qinghua closes his eyes.

Once Wu Yanshin returns with a cup of chicken broth, Mu Qingfang says, “Shixiong, I’m going to hold this cup for you. I need you to drink the whole thing for me.”

“I’ll try, Shidi,” Shang Qinghua sighs, and does his best. With some encouragement he’s able to drink the entire cup.

“My prescription for you is food, drink and sleep. Not necessarily in that order,” Mu Qingfang clarifies. He pats Shang Qinghua’s head.

“Oh, man,” Shang Qinghua says. “That’s sweet. Head pats….kinda nice….” The Lord of An Ding peak sinks into sleep.

Mu Qingfang sighs. He needs to talk to the Sect Leader. He sends a message with a disciple over to Qiong Ding requesting a meeting as soon as possible. To his surprise, Yue Qingyuan shows up in person not one hour later!

He leads the sect leader into his office, Mu Qingfang sitting behind his desk. “Thank you for coming, Zhangmen Shixiong.”

“Of course, Mu Shidi.” Yue Qingyuan says pleasantly. “How can I be of help.”

“Shang Qinghua came perilously close to death this afternoon,” Mu Qingfang states plainly, and that gets Yue Qingyuan’s attention.

Yue Qingyuan leans forward, frowning in concern. “Was he injured? What happened?”

“What happened is that Shang Shixiong has been literally working himself to death.” Mu Qingfang lets that information sink in. “From my assessment, he has not eaten nor had anything to drink in days. His qi levels were so low from keeping his bodily functions going that his meridians *collapsed*. If not for my head disciple and senior healers, he would have died at one of those bridge reconstruction sites.”

Mu Qingfang leans forward, expression grim. “Was Shang Shixiong under the impression that he was to work continuously until the bridges were repaired?” He folds his hands and waits for the answer.

“Mu Shidi-”

“It’s a yes or no question, Zhangmen Shixiong.” Mu Qingfang says, not bothering to hide the anger in his voice. “We may be cultivators, but there are still limits to what the human body can endure. I strongly suggest putting a plan in place which will provide for adequate recovery time and *rest*.”

Yue Qingyuan looks troubled. “Shidi, the situation was far more dire than you know. Has Liu Qingge been to see you yet?”

Mu Qingfang snorts. “No. After the emergency meeting the other day I told him to come to Qian Cao the following day. Needless to say, he did not do so.”

Running a palm over his face, Yue Qingyuan looks exasperated. “He had a qi deviation during his seclusion. Shen Shidi was able to save his life.”

Eyebrows raised, Mu Qingfang says, “Was there a reason I am only being told this *now*?”

“You must understand Shidi, the Sect is in a delicate position. Already I am receiving letters from Huan Hua Palace suggesting they send cultivators to *help* us recover. If our War God is seen as not at full strength-”

“Forgiveness but are you implying that I am somehow unable to keep patient confidentiality? *Me*?” Mu Qingfang says, incredulous.

Meeting his eyes, Yue Qingyuan says, “Mu Shidi, forgiveness, but-”

“But *what*?” Mu Qingfang demands.

Sighing, Yue Qingyuan says, “Shidi. It has not been a secret that you have….to put it delicately not been at your best during the past three years.”

“Oh? Pray tell me what part of my duties I have failed to carry out?” Mu Qingfang waits expectantly. “Was it all the clinics I worked at? Perhaps the middle of the night emergency calls? Were there patient complaints? Please. *Enlighten this stupid healer*.” He finishes acidly.

Yue Qingyuan winces a bit. “Mu Shidi, that’s not what I meant.”

“Well, that’s what you *said*. Zhangmen Shixiong should forgive me if I listen to what he says rather than what he intends to say.” Mu Qingfang holds up a hand to forestall any more deflecting. “Can we return to the issue? It is *unreasonable* to expect people to work without any rest periods, or time to eat or sleep. Also, I request that you send Liu Shixiong to me with all haste, to make sure *he* is not on the way to another qi deviation.” He maintains eye contact.

“Is Shang Qinghua going to recover?” Yue Qingyuan asks after several awkward moments.

Thanks for asking! Mu Qingfang thinks, annoyed. *Fucking finally.* “Yes, I am quite hopeful.” He should probably make an effort to stop yelling at the sect leader, but god DAMN he is irritating.

Getting to his feet, Yue Qingyuan says, “Thank you for your dedication.”

Fuck you! Mu Qingfang thinks as loud as he can. He gives a perfunctory bow and the sect leader turns and goes. “Not at my best,” he mutters under his breath. He walks back to Shang Qinghua’s room to check on him.

Someone, probably Yanshin, put a chair at his bedside. Mu Qingfang sits down.

Shang Qinghua turns his head to the side and smiles weakly. “Hey Cucumber bro.”

Since he's awake, Mu Qingfang sends a qi message requesting more broth and tray of simple foods. "Anytime you want to quit trying to die on me would be awesome," he says. "Airplane," he adds more seriously. "You almost didn't make it this time."

Shang Qinghua sighs and looks up at the ceiling. "We haven't really talked in a long time, bro. There's been….a lot of shit happened to me while you weren't paying attention."

A disciple enters with a tray, and Mu Qingfang takes it from her hands. "Thank you. I will help Peak Lord Shang eat. Close the door behind you, please." Once she's gone, he charges a privacy talisman and sets it on the door.

Mu Qingfang raises the head of the bed a bit more to make it easier for Airplane to eat. "Here, Shang Shixiong, drink some more broth." He holds the cup, and Shang Qinghua drinks obediently.

"You know it's bad when *broth* tastes pretty delicious," Shang Qinghua jokes. His half hearted smile fades at Mu Qingfang's serious expression. Picking at his nails, Shang Qinghua says, "Before I passed out, I heard you went over to Qing Jing peak." He waits a beat. "Is the marriage back on?"

Huffing a little, Mu Qingfang crosses his arms over his chest. "We're talking. Airplane. What's been going on?"

"No offense bro, but are you *sure* you want to know? Like, sure *sure*?" Once Mu Qingfang nods, Shang Qinghua sighs again. "Well. You know how I said you were lucky you don't have a SYSTEM? Yeah. Well, I do. And it tries to kill me on the regular." Shang Qinghua averts his eyes, and picks at his blankets. "It…gives me missions and if I fail, it sends me back."

"Back?" Mu Qingfang echoes stupidly. "Back where?"

Shang Qinghua just looks at him. He swallows. "Um. To my old body."

"But aren't you-"

"*Yeah*, Cucumber, I'm *dead* there." Airplane looks up at the ceiling. His eyes glimmer and as he blinks a tear rolls down his cheek. "Of course I didn't *want* to, but like, I also didn't want to *die*."

In fits and starts, Shang Qinghua haltingly explains how he passed on the weakness of the rainbow bridges, so that one direct and brutal blow in a very certain spot, would shatter them all. Failure to do this would have resulted in a very painful death.

Mu Qingfang looks away thinking of the kids that died when they fell from the bridge. The ones clinging to the cliffside, gasping at tree limbs frantically. He thinks of the kids with third degree burns over more than a quarter of the body. He thinks of the way the Qiong Ding disciples are walking around with one hand on their swords, and haunted eyes.

Would Shen Yuan do any better? If he was forced to do something terrible just to stay alive? Mu Qingfang imagines having to push Binghe into the Abyss. *I'd rather die,* he thinks, but would he? Would he, really?

He doesn't know.

"Hey wait a second," Mu Qingfang says. "How are you able to tell *me* about this? Shouldn't it be giving you a punishment protocol or something for divulging secrets?"

Shang Qinghua smiles bitterly. "That's the thing Cucumber bro. My system doesn't see you at all. As far as it's concerned you do not exist. It knows the original goods *died*, ascended, whatever." He waves a hand in the air. "System," he says. "Am I alone in this room?" Shang Qinghua's eyes go unfocused. He snorts, then says in a monotone voice, "User OO1 is currently alone." His expression is bleak.

Mu Qingfang suddenly recalls all the times in the past year that Shang Qinghua tried to talk to him. He reaches out and runs a hand over his head. "You're not alone anymore."

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: Did we know that skin contact is kind of addicting?
MQF: We do now!

SQH: Hey glad the marriage is back on, don't mind me having a nervous breakdown in the background
MQF: FUCK! How come i keep forgetting about the PLOT!

I ended up waking up super early this morning, certainly not of my choice and just banged out this chapter while it was still dark. Ooof. My parents just left, dinner was good-we cooked steaks for dad and salmon for mom!

Please tell me what you think! Like.I exist solely off comments!!!! <3

Trying to get up that great big hill of hope

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: so much talking. I wish I was kidding

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mu Qingfang sits with Shang Qinghua for awhile even after he falls asleep, running his hand over his head gently, and then later, just holding his hand while he sleeps. He feels terribly guilty that he blew off all those times Airplane tried to talk to him.

I'm so sorry, he thinks. *But I really was trying to keep my head above water.*

Well. He will do better. Having just discussed with Shen Qingqiu how they were both touch starved and skin hungry, it's easy to recognise the same signs and symptoms in Shang Qinghua. Hell, Mu Qingfang thinks, probably even Yue Qingyuan needs a hug. Who would be bold enough to embrace the sect leader?

Ha. Maybe he should see if Shen Qingqiu would like to-that would kill a couple birds with the same stone.

He leaves Shang Qinghua's room and finds Wu Yanshin in her office. She has a good size desk, much like his own. Her office is filled near to bursting with plants. Mu Qingfang wonders if OG Qingfang gifted her a bunch of plants sometime. It feels like something he would have done. Right now, Yanshin is leaning back in her chair, looking bleakly up at the ceiling.

"Shizun," she says. "How do you do it?"

Raising his eyebrows, Mu Qingfang takes a seat opposite her. "Do what?"

Straightening up, she meets his gaze. "How do you stay sane when everyone around you keeps trying to die?"

He laughs out loud. "The fact that you still think I'm sane concerns me," he jokes. He sobers and adds, "I don't have a great answer for you. Sometimes I drink, which probably isn't the best way of coping." He frowns, thinking. "I'm trying to figure out how to leave work at work, if you know what I mean."

Wu Yanshin gives him a sour look.

"You could always start bringing back strays," He offers with a smile.

That gets a laugh out of her. Snorting a little, Wu Yanshin says, “Would there be any room left on the peak if I started doing that?”

Mu Qingfang rubs a hand over his face. “We’d find a way.” Leaning forward he tells her seriously, “Yanshin, I mean this. If you come across someone that we can *help*, even if it’s just giving them a warm and clean place to stay and they -I don’t know-wash dishes, or sew, or something. I would support you.”

Looking a little misty, Wu Yanshin says, “Thanking Shizun.” She sighs. “How is Shang Shibo?”

Shaking his head, Mu Qingfang says, “Under an enormous amount of stress.” He meets her eyes solidly. “Shang Qinghua is very lucky that you were there when he started deviating. Without your qi transfusion, I don’t think he would have made it. So, I’m really glad you came to work today.”

She takes in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “Shizun…Shang Shibo has always been very nice to me. When I send him requisitions, he usually makes it a priority. Sometimes it feels like *he’s* in charge of everything and not Yue Qingyuan.”

“Yes.” Mu Qingfang agrees simply. “I think Shang Qinghua is the glue that keeps this place running. Maybe not smoothly, but *running* just the same.”

“Uh-oh,” Yanshin murmurs, amusement glinting in her eyes. “Sounds like Shizun’s about to take in another stray. Someone tell Shang Shibo he’s getting adopted.”

Mu Qingfang flicks a little qi and she deflects it easily, laughing.

Wu Yanshin’s smile fades slowly. “I’ve missed you, Renshu. It’s good to have you back.”

He can’t even tell her that he didn’t go anywhere, because he *did*. Stuck in his own misery for so long. Mu Qingfang really needs to do better. “I’m sorry, Yanshin.”

“Renshu! I don’t want or need an apology-” Wu Yanshin taps the desk, emphasizing each word.

Oh, he’s heard that somewhere before, though, hasn’t he?

“Besides, sadness like that…” She frowns. “It’s like a disease, especially the way it exacerbates and then goes into remission. I’m just glad…well. For a while Yanmei and I were very worried about you.” She chews her lip for a moment. “We were both very grateful you perked up a bit after that Qing Jing disciple started visiting you.”

The thought of Binghe always brings a smile to Mu Qingfang’s face. “He’s a sweet boy.” He remembers how adamant Binghe was that *he didn’t make* whatever was in the box Shen Qingqiu gave him. The comment only made sense in retrospect, especially given that his water chestnut cakes had some minor imperfections. Which reminds him! He has water chestnut cakes at home!

He excuses himself, fully intending to return to his home and eat some snacks. Mu Qingfang stops by his office before he leaves, checking to see if there's any urgent paperwork on his desk.

"You wanted me here, here I am."

Mu Qingfang looks up, both surprised and unsurprised to see Liu Qingge glaring from the doorway. "Ah, Liu Shixiong, yes. Remember when I told you to see me the following day?" He smiles tightly. "That was not friendly advise, Shixiong. *That* was an order from your *doctor*. One would think that having just experienced a near fatal qi deviation-"

Liu Qingge starts guiltily.

"-Yes, I know about that." Mu Qingfang crosses his arms over his chest and doesn't hide his annoyance. "Any symptoms since you left seclusion."

"No." Liu Qingge says flatly, avoiding eye contact.

Mu Qingfang just waits in silence.

Liu Qingge shuffles his feet then looks at the ceiling. He crosses his arms over his chest. "Headaches."

"Sit." Mu Qingfang points at the chair opposite his desk. He waits while Liu Qingge, looking very put upon- deigns to sit the fuck down. The war god yanks his sleeve back sullenly. Mu Qingfang rolls his eyes and runs a scan.

Thankfully, Shen Qingqiu did a rather remarkable job of straightening out Liu Qingges's meridians. "Any idea what caused you to deviate?"

Liu Shixiong sighs, and looks away. "I was close to a breakthrough."

Manfully, Mu Qingfang resists the urge to berate his idiotic shixiong. Instead he says mildly, "That could have ended badly for you Liu Shixiong." Doing a more thorough scan this time, Mu Qingfang finds a snag in one of his heart meridians. Delicately, he smooths the snag back down and lends a trickle of soothing qi to treat any pain.

"Did you just do something?" Liu Qingge asks with a frown. He absently rubs his chest. "You had a very minor irregularity in one of your heart meridians. If there was any disruption in the flow of your qi, it could have caused problems." Mu Qingfang says. "Are you having any pain?"

"No…" Liu Qingge says. He lets out a deep breath. "It feels…better."

"Oh, good," Mu Qingfang replies, genuinely happy. He lets go of Liu Qingge's wrist and pats him on the shoulder. He ignores the confused look on Shixiong's face. Is everyone around here touch starved? Fuck, Mu Qingfang needs to start a roster for therapeutic hugs or something before everyone loses it. "Thank you for allowing me to treat you."

Liu Qingge rises to his feet. “It’s…okay.” He peers at Mu Qingfang’s face. “You look better, Mu Shidi,” he says eventually. He shifts restlessly then adds, “I told Shen Qingqiu he had to fix whatever he did wrong.”

Mu Qingfang absolutely does not think about making out with Shen Qingqiu in the bamboo house. “Shen Shixiong took that well, I’m sure.”

Huffing, Liu Qingge says, “He didn’t actually argue, for once. Anyway, thanks.” With that, the elusive Liu Shixiong escapes his clutches!

It’s dark outside, Mu Qingfang is kind of shocked to discover! Where the fuck did the day go?

The box of treats is still sitting on his table, right where he’d left it. Mu Qingfang sits down and snags a water chestnut cake. It may not look *perfect* but it is *delicious*. After inhaling a cake, he realizes that he hasn’t eaten all day. For a few minutes he taps his fingers on the table, debating.

This Qingqiu would gladly court Shen Yuan with the goal of a permanent romantic relationship.

Shen Qingqiu’s written words pop into Mu Qingfang’s mind. He pulls the letter out from the folds of his robes and reads through it once more.

In summation, this Qingqiu has a deep and lasting affection for Shen Yuan. This Qingqiu would gladly court Shen Yuan with the goal of a permanent romantic relationship. This Qingqiu begs for the opportunity to show Shen Yuan his steadfastness, a chance to make up for the pain his actions have caused.

If it pleases Shen Yuan, then wherever and whenever is convenient, this Qingqiu would gladly meet

He’s not living in modern China, he reminds himself. This is Xianxia land where strong emotions can kill you via qi deviation. And Shen Yuan’s never been good about playing mind games with people. He’s always felt like, if you want to see someone, why should you pretend that you don’t?

Mu Qingfang forms a qi message and lets Shen Qingqiu know that he is welcome to join Mu Qingfang for dinner, if he is not busy or occupied.

All I can do is put it out there, he thinks, reading the words, *If it pleases Shen Yuan*. “It would please me if you got your ass over here,” Mu Qingfang mutters. He eats another cake-fuck how is this so *good*?- and then wanders back to his bedroom.

Shucking off his outer robes, he tosses them carelessly over a chair. It’s a good thing OG Qingfang made all these planters to be self-sustaining, he thinks, scrutinizing them. Otherwise he’d be living with a bunch of dead plants.

Mu Qingfang flops on the bed and stares at the ceiling for awhile. He's not meditating but his brain is just kind of static. He's not sure how much time passes. So much has happened recently that Mu Qingfang hasn't had the opportunity or inclination to just lay around.

Firm knocks at his door jolt him from his zoned out state. Mu Qingfang yawns and then goes to answer the door. Shen Qingqiu is waiting on his porch. "Hi," he smiles. "This is a welcome surprise."

Shen Qingqiu blinks, and then laughs. "Did Shidi forget he invited me?" He steps inside, and Mu Qingfang shuts the door behind him. "Well?" he drawls. "Did you?" A hint of a smile lingers on Shen Qingqiu's lips.

"I, ah, maybe," Mu Qingfang hedges. "In my defense it's been a long day."

"So it has," Shen Qingqiu agrees. He reaches out and brushes his thumb over Mu Qingfang's cheek. "A-Yuan was close to taking a nap this morning."

Cheeks heating, Mu Qingfang ducks his head. "It was very relaxing, in my defense."

"Yes, I felt much the same." Shen Qingqiu says warmly.

Oh, that's. Mu Qingfang feels like it's been *forever* since he's heard that tone from Shen Qingqiu.

"Would A-Yuan be open to letting me rub his back tonight?" Shen Qingqiu asks, moving close enough that Mu Qingfang feels the heat from his body. Shen Qingqiu rests his hands on Mu Qingfang's shoulders. Then he squeezes the trapezius muscles on either side of his neck, sending tingles and gooseflesh all down Mu Qingfang's arms.

"I, um, if you want, sure," Mu Qingfang says, feeling rattled. He lays his hands on Shen Qingqiu's chest, tapping his fingers a little.

Shen Qingqiu just looks amused. "Shall we go to your bedroom?"

Why does Mu Qingfang feel like he's being seduced?! He's not, like, nervous or anything (except for how he kind of *is*) it's just that…oh what the hell. Maybe this is Shen Qingqiu trying to show his affection? "Okay," he says softly.

For the second time that day, he strips down to his trousers. Now it's *his* turn to lay on his stomach with Shen Qinqgiu kneeling over his lower back.

Shen Qingqiu starts by running his hands all over Mu Qingfang's back, just feeling his skin. His hands are warm, almost hot.

"Sometimes I think about when A-Yuan introduced me to the wax treatments for my hands," Shen Qingqiu remarks, using his fingers to feel how knotted up Mu Qingfang's neck is. "I didn't mention it, but…that was the first time in quite a while that anyone had touched me without the intention to cause harm."

"A-Jiu," Mu Qingfang whispers, blinking rapidly.

“Mu Shidi was so gentle, guiding my hand into the wax that he’d heated up perfectly.” Shen Qingqiu leans over, and kisses the back of Mu Qingfang’s neck. “Mu Shidi was treating me like we’d never spoken before. Like I was someone worth knowing.”

Strong thumbs press firmly against a stubborn knot under Mu Qingfang’s skin. He clears his throat and says hoarsely, “Some oil on your hands might help. I should have used some this morning but-” But I just wanted to feel your skin any way possible, he doesn’t say. Somehow he feels like Shen Qingqiu hears the unspoken thought.

His back feels cool and bereft when Shen Qingqiu pauses the massage to rummage through his sleeves for oil. Soon enough though, he hears the stopper unplug and feels how Shen Qingqiu shifts when he pours oil on his palms. He rubs his hands together a few times and then lays then flat on Mu Qingfang’s back, letting the heat sink in.

Mu Qingfang moans involuntarily. “Oh, *damn* that feels nice.” He sighs, feeling like he’s melting into his bed.

“You have a rather large lump under your skin,” Shen Qingqiu mentions after awhile. “Just… *here*,” and he presses two fingers into the spot just under his shoulder blade.

Holy shit, that hurts! Tensing a little, Mu Qingfang says, “Can you try using a little qi? A little less than you’d use to check someone’s meridians.”

But Shen Qingqiu is not so easily convinced. “I don’t want to hurt you.” And suddenly, Mu Qingfang gets a vivid sense memory of Shen Qingqiu between his legs, opening him up, saying the same thing.

And all at once, Mu Qingfang is almost unbearably hard. *Fuck, fuck, fuck* he thinks. He swallows and says, “It won’t hurt, A-Jiu, it will help ease the pain some. The-the muscle is knotted up, and the fibers have to relax so that you can massage them to be in the same direction…” Is he babbling? Does Shen Qingqiu really want a physiology lesson?!

His back tingles where Shen Qingqiu applies some qi, and then the knot loosens up. Strong thumbs press into the area, smoothing out the muscle and easing the pain there. “A-Jiu,” he sighs.

“A-Yuan,” Shen Qingqiu says, and his voice sounds strained. He keeps rubbing Mu Qingfang’s back though, now using long strokes with his palms on either side of his spine.

Mu Qingfang hazily thinks this is how a housecat sleeping in the sun must feel. He feels so relaxed, and weirdly, more connected with his body than usual. He squirms, rubbing his erection against the bed. The friction feels good.

“A-Yuan-” Shen Qingqiu says again, and Mu Qingfang turns over, so he’s facing his lover. Shen Qingqiu’s eyes meet his for a moment, and Mu Qingfang licks his lips. Shen Qingqiu tracks the movement of his tongue and then lowers his body so he’s sitting right over Mu Qingfang’s thighs.

“*Yes*,” Mu Qingfang says. Then he grins. “How about you?”

Shen Qingqiu laughs a little self consciously. “Can you be more specific?”

Mu Qingfang says, “Here, let me sit up.” Once Shen Qingqiu shifts to the side, Mu Qingfang says, “There’s lots of stuff we could try. Full dual cultivation…there’s so much *more* than just *that*.” For a moment he imagines himself saying this as Shen Yuan. He would have died of embarrassment. But it’s only Shen Qingqiu and himself, and this, what they’re doing, isn’t for anyone *else*. Just them.

“You could fuck my thighs,” Mu Qingfang says boldly. “Or I could. I think giving you a handjob would be fun.” Shen Qingqiu’s cheeks have gone nearly scarlet and Mu Qingfang finds it unfairly adorable. Therefore he adds, “I would also like to try using my mouth.”

He reaches up and tugs Shen Qingqiu down on top of him. Mu Qingfang brushes some hair away from his face. “*Or,* we can just make out for a while.”

Shen Qingqiu leans in and kisses him softly. “I would like to hold you.”

“Oh,” Mu Qingfang says. “Yes. Let’s do that.” He gives Shen Qingqiu another kiss, then turns onto his side. Behind him, Shen Qingqiu wraps his body around him, knees tucked up behind Mu Qingfangs, and an arm over his waist. “You’re so smart,” Mu Qingfang murmurs.

“I have my moments,” Shen Qingqiu says softly in his ear.

Chapter End Notes

I actually had to do WORK today! Can you believe it! They want me to WORK at WORK. Crazy.

WYS: How would YOU like it if I brought home strays?
MQF *beaming* You should do that!

And I take a deep breath and I get real high

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: None!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mu Qingfang wakes to the feeling of tickling at the back of his neck. “Mmm.” Shen Qingqiu must be awake already. They’d cuddled for a long time, and then polished off the rest of the water chestnut cakes. Mu Qingfang stomach growls, and behind him, Shen Qingqiu chuckles.

“If you’re willing to get dressed and come to my peak, I will feed you,” Shen Qingqiu murmurs.

More awake already, Mu Qingfang says, “I will take that offer!”

Once at the bamboo house, Shen Qingqiu lights a talisman and then waits. Sure enough a few minutes later, a disciple knocks eagerly at the door. Shen Qingqiu gives Mu Qingfang a wry look and then sighs. “This boy,” he mutters, and goes to let the disciple in.

“Luo Binghe greets Shizun and -Mu Shishu!” Luo Binghe looks way too alert for this early in the morning. “How can this disciple be of service?”

Shen Qingqiu snorts. “Mu Shishu is hungry,” he says, and gives Binghe an expectant look.

“Oh! This disciple is happy to make breakfast for Shizun and Mu Shishu!” Luo Binghe looks sly. “Did Shishu enjoy Shizun’s gift?”

“Binghe!” Shen Qingqiu scolds, but the boy just grins.

“They were delicious,” Mu Qingfang says. “Did you teach your Shizun how to make them?” He really can’t help teasing both of them about this.

“Yes, especially since-”

“Out,” Shen Qingqiu says, interrupting. “Return quickly.”

Somehow Binghe smiles without smiling. “Yes, Shizun!” He’s grown so much but still darts off like a little kid.

Mu Qingfang can’t help feeling shyly pleased that Shen Qingqiu went through the trouble to learn how to make his favorite sweet treat. He follows Shen Qingqiu to where he’s lingering

at the door, and gives him a hug. Shen Qingqiu leans into it, sighing into Mu Qingfang's hair.

They quietly chat while they're waiting for Binghe to bring the food back.

"So," Shen Qingqiu says, once they're both seated at the table. "Luo Binghe was visited by a dream demon after the attack. It dragged us both into Binghe's dream but since you didn't say anything I wasn't sure if you remembered."

Frowning, Mu Qingfang thinks back. "Oh, wait, I had a dream about the two of you but I really couldn't remember any details." He meets Shen Qinqiu's eyes. "Tell me."

With a disgruntled sigh, Shen Qingqiu says, "An ancient dream demon, Meng Mo, offered to teach Binghe dream manipulation in exchange for --" He waves a hand. "Living in his head or something. Meng Mo is currently a disembodied spirit that requires a host to survive."

Blinking, Mu Qingfang says, "Is that safe?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Shen Qingqiu says, then rubs a hand over his forehead. "I can't teach him demonic cultivation, and I *wouldn't* even if I could." He sighs. "I'm thinking of sending him to Bai Zhan for extra lessons from Liu Shidi." Now Shen Qingqiu looks smug. "He owes me a life debt, so helping out with a disciple is the *least* that brute can do."

"You did a good job with his deviation, A-Jiu," Mu Qingfang says honestly. "Without being specific, I can say that his meridians are in excellent shape, considering." He meets Shen Qingqiu's eyes. "You did very well."

Shen Qingqiu clears his throat and says nothing, but he looks pleased at the praise. "The Immortal Alliance Conference is coming up soon. Are you sending any disciples?"

Mu Qingfang says, "I will go, as will Xie Yanmei and several of our senior healers. I will probably bring two or three juniors as well. They won't compete for beads, but I will have them out with the competitors practicing field medicine." Sadly Wu Yanshin will stay behind this time to keep the peak running smoothly. He will definitely miss her steadfast presence, but he's sure that Xie Yanmei will help keep Mu Qingfang in line.

"Well. I really have no choice except to send Binghe, along with Ming Fan and Ning Yingying." Shen Qingqiu sounds perturbed. "I can't exactly keep the boy back when he's the strongest disciple on the peak."

Mu Qingfang gets the impression that Shen Qingqiu is still a little irritated by that. He's not sure that he should bring up the possibility of the Conference being attacked by demons. Mu Qingfang has a very bad feeling that Shang Qinghua is going to have to play his role. Still, he feels pretty confident that Shen Qingqiu won't be shoving him into the abyss.

Carefully, Mu Qingfang says, "Do you think we should give Luo Binghe a qiankun bag of supplies just in case something bad happens and his seal breaks?"

"That's probably wise," Shen Qingqiu admits. "I confess, it hadn't occurred to me that the boy's seal will likely break at the *worst* possible time."

“So optimistic,” Mu Qingfang chides.

Arching an eyebrow, Shen Qingqiu says dryly, “Do I *seem* like an optimist? If something can go wrong, it *will* and the only defense is thorough planning.”

It’s terrible, Mu Qingfang knows, but watching Shen Qingqiu perfectly describe Murphy’s law without using the name for it is kind of cute.

“Oh, and another thing, A-Yuan.” Shen Qingqiu leans forward. “I paid a visit to Cheng Yi two days ago.”

Brightening, Mu Qingfang asks, “Lovely! How is she doing?”

“Were you going to mention that you stole away the girl and her baby to your peak?” Shen Qingqiu’s dark green eyes are shadowed.

“To tell you the truth I forgot about it. That was two and half years ago for me,” Mu Qingfang says. “They’re thriving, incidentally. Lai LiHua brings the baby to visit me for check ups. He has these bright, bright eyes and chubby cheeks! So cute!”

Shen Qingqiu looks down. “I missed a lot.” He adds, “You like children.” It’s not a question.

“I used to have a little sister,” Shen Yuan says, smiling a little painfully. “She was only a couple of years younger, so we were pretty close. I…still miss her.” It’s a topic that Mu Qingfang doesn’t usually bring up. For one thing, because he can’t talk about it with anyone else except maybe Airplane, but he also knows that family is a touchy subject for Shen Qingqiu, having been abandoned. “I think my parents would be shocked if I could ever tell them that I became a doctor here.”

Wearing a complicated expression, Shen Qingqiu offers, “I am sure they would be proud.”

Binghe chooses that moment to return with food, knocking and then entering without waiting for a response. Shen Qingqiu issues a heavy sigh but says nothing. Luo Binghe presents them with bowls of perfectly prepared congee with braised pork, ginger and green onions. It smells utterly heavenly.

“Luo Binghe,” Shen Qingqiu says and the boy stands at attention. “I am going to arrange extra lessons with Liu Qingge for you. As a physical cultivator you should train those skills.” Shen Qingqiu’s eyebrows drop down and he adds, “Do not neglect your spiritual cultivation, however.”

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe doesn’t sound enthusiastic, “Aren’t you always telling us not to act like Bai Zhan brutes?”

“Have you gone deaf?” Shen Qingqiu demands. “I just said that you are a physical cultivator. Considering the cultivation style of Qing Jing peak isn’t suited to your nature at all, it’s a miracle that you’ve come this far. Wipe those tears away before I *give* you something to cry about-“

“Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang murmurs, hoping to diffuse this. Shen Qingqiu glares balefully and sits back in his chair. “Binghe. I think your Shizun is trying to better prepare you for the conference so that you can win the entire thing and make him proud.” Mu Qingfang looks over at Shen Qingqiu.

“Not exactly, but close enough I suppose,” Shen Qingqiu allows. “Luo Binghe, I expect you to apply yourself. Liu Qingge, for all of his faults, is a peerless swordsman.”

The Protagonist looks like he wants to protest some more, but after a sharp look from Shen Qingqiu he bows. “Yes, Shizun.”

“I will talk to Liu Qingge soon,” Shen Qingqiu tells him. “Dismissed.”

With one last mournful glance at Mu Qingfang, Luo Binghe excuses himself.

After breakfast, Mu Qingfang regretfully returns to his peak. He enters the Healing Pavilion and goes to find Shang Qinghua immediately. The An Ding peak lord is sitting up in bed ignoring his food and using his bedside table as a makeshift desk.

“Airplane,” Mu Qingfang says from the doorway. “You’re supposed to be resting.”

Shang Qinghua looks better than he did yesterday which isn’t saying much considering how close to death he was. He’s at least had a bath and a change of clothes, and his skin color is a few shades on the right side of pale. “This is resting, bro. You just don’t know what it looks like when I’m doing my usual workload.” He nods at the chair, pushed away to the far wall. “Come sit.” He waggles his eyebrows. “I’ll even let you scan me.”

“Wow! An invitation to scan someone?” Mu Qingfang jokes. “That’s a pretty good deal. Sometimes I literally have to rope Liu Qingge down so I can check him out.” He moves the chair next to the bed and sits, and as advertised, Shang Qinghua holds out an arm.

His meridians are still inflamed, but aligned. Airplane must have meditated at least a little because his qi reserves have improved. Mu Qingfang delicately soothes the worst areas with some of his own qi. When he’s done, he releases Airplane’s arm and pats his shoulder. “Better,” Mu Qingfang says, “But your meridians aren’t back to normal yet. I think it’s likely to take a few days until you’re at one hundred percent.”

Shang Qinghua sighs and lays his brush down. He’s got an inkstone with ink sitting on top of a stasis array scribbled on rice paper. It will keep the ink from drying out. Clever, Mu Qingfang thinks. “Is it too late for me to switch to Qian Cao instead of An Ding?” He smiles wanly. “I’ll be a good disciple, Cucumber bro.”

Mu Qingfang doesn’t laugh. “Airplane. What can I do to help you?”

Shang Qinghua looks down and picks at his blanket. Without looking up he says softly, “I have to help Mobei Jun attack the Conference.” At Mu Qingfang’s blank look he adds, “He’s an ice demon. I saved his life when we were teenagers. In PIDW, Mobei Jun kills Shang Qinghua.” Airplane says this in the most resigned voice Mu Qingfang has ever heard.

“Wait a second,” Mu Qingfang says, realizing. “Is this your lover? The one who beats you up?”

Shang Qinghua looks at him and blinks. “Uhhh, like, I don’t know where you’re getting your info from but, *I’m not sleeping with Mobei Jun*!” Then he adds, “Man, I wouldn’t mind it though, his *chest* alone is-”

“Focus!” Mu Qingfang says. “The original goods thought you were in a relationship with someone that was beating you up.” He lets his expression soften. “He deliberately left medical supplies out for you to steal, since you didn’t feel comfortable going to him.”

“Aw. I had no idea,” Shang Qinghua says. “To be honest, I thought he was a little dumb for leaving them out like that.” He looks up and chuckles. “Except every time I went to steal some they had always been replaced.” He lifts up his cup of water. “To the OG!” He drinks it down.

Mu Qing, Mu Qingfang thinks, *You were a good guy.* “Okay,” he says. “Shen Qingqiu is gonna send Binghe over to Bai Zhan for extra training, and-”

“Wait, wait, wait-since when does *Shen Qingqiu* do that?” Shang Qinghua demands.

“Did I not tell you?” Mu Qingfang asks, genuinely curious. “I told him a few years ago that Binghe was part demon.”

Shang Qinghua slaps a hand over his face. “Do you know how many points I lost because of that! *Plot Deviation Has Occurred,*” Shang Qinghua recites in a monotone. “*Points will be deducted*.”

“I don’t think that Shen Qingqiu is going to push him into the Abyss.” Mu Qingfang says, while Shang Qinghua gapes at him.

“Bro, you really enjoy pushing your luck, huh? Could you *not*? Please?” Shang Qinghua begs.

“The conference is what, like nine months? We need to get ready for when shit hits the fan,” Mu Qingfang says, crossing his arm over his chest. “And I refuse to let A-Jiu get turned into a human stick.”

“Oh, ho! It’s *A-Jiu* now?” Shang Qinghua crows, grinning like a mad thing. “Seriously, when’s the wedding? Should I order red silk now for you guys?”

“Shut up, you dick,” Mu Qingfang says. After a few minutes he says, “I’m gonna start making a list of things we need to worry about.”

Shang Qinghau snorts. “I’ve had that list in my head for years, bro.” He starts counting off items on his hand. “First, all the disciples that end up getting killed. Second, *I* don’t want to get killed, third, we need to prevent Binghe from coming back to kill us all after he gets out of the Abyss, fourth, we need to prevent the merging of the realms. Fifth, prevent-oh shit. I think you prevented that one already, actually.”

“What are you talking about?” Mu Qingfang asks, leaning forward.

“Well, at the end of PIDW, Luo Binghe cuts off Shen Qingqiu’s legs and sends one of them to Yue Qingyuan in a box. Yue Qingyuan then tries to come save Shen Qinghqiu to make up for how he didn’t save him back when they were slaves.” Shang Qinghua waves a hand in the air. “There was a lot of guilt there, you know? But they reconciled and so-” Shang Qinghua pauses. “Did you say Shen Shixiong is sending Binghe to Bai Zhan for lessons?”

“Yeah, he said that Liu Qingge owed him a life debt and this was how he was going to collect.”

Shang Qinghua slumps against his pillows. “That’s. I mean- Liu Qingge would really do anything he asks because of that debt, it’s an honor thing you know?” He closes his eyes for a minute. “Wow, I’m tired.”

Suddenly aware that he’s been agitating his patient, Mu Qingfang says, horrified, “Oh, shit, I’m sorry, Airplane, I should have-”

Opening his eyes, Shang Qinghua glares at Mu Qingfang. “Shut up Cucumber. I really feel better just because we talked about it a little. It’s been kinda terrible having to go through this alone, especially knowing basically everybody I know is going to hate me in a year.”

“We’ll figure it out, Airplane.” Mu Qingfang says firmly, getting to his feet. He wanders a little closer, and then pats Shang Qinghua on the head. “Get some rest.”

He leaves Airplane and leaves to find Wu Yanshin. He finds her in her office, chatting with Xie Yanmei. “Oh no,” he says, smiling, “I’m outnumbered.”

“Funny, Shizun,” Wu Yanshin says. She exchanges a glance with Yanmei, on the other side of her desk. “Yanmei is leaving soon for clinic, and was just trying to find out if you’re attending today.”

Xie Yanmei says, “Did Shizun get a better offer? He wasn’t home this morning.”

Okay, why are his senior disciples bullying him today! “I was home, I just…had breakfast on Qing Jing this morning.”

Wu Yanshin snickers, not even bothering to hide it. “Okay, Shizun,” she says this like he’s making it up.

“Anyway,” Mu Qingfang says firmly, “Yes, I can come along if you need me.”

“We need to leave rather soon,” Xie Yanmei informs him. “Today’s clinic is in Yiyang province near the Luo river.”

“I’m ready when you are,” he says.

It’s late when Mu Qingfang gets back to Qian Cao, and he’s surprised to find someone sitting on his steps. It’s dark, and though the qi signature feels familiar, he can’t really make out whose there. “Hello?” he calls.

“Shishu.”

Ah, he thinks. It’s Binghe! “Hello Binghe,” Mu Qingfang calls, moving closer. “I just got back from traveling, but what can I help you with?” He opens the door and motions Binghe to join him. “Have a seat,” he says, indicating the table.

Luo Binghe looks a little distraught. What in the world could have happened? “Shishu… Shizun told me today that you *know*.”

“Oh, that.” Mu Qingfang says with an easy nod, taking a seat across from Binghe. “Yeah, I’ve known for several years.”

“What? But you never said anything?” Luo Binghe exclaims.

Mu Qingfang snorts. “What was I supposed to say? Oops, by the way I think you have some demonic heritage? It seemed safer to let you be.”

“But…” Luo Binghe purses his lips. “Weren’t you scared?”

Now Mu Qingfang has to laugh. “Of *Binghe*? I don’t think so. How could I be afraid of the kid I carried to Qian Cao one day? Binghe was so tiny!” He smiles at the young man across from him. “Besides,” he says seriously. “Binghe is a good boy.”

“Shishu sounds sure about that,” Luo Binghe says a little solemnly.

Reaching out, Mu Qingfang pats his hands. “That’s because Shishu *is* sure about that. Binghe is good, and he will excel wherever he goes in life.” He waits for Binghe to make eye contact then says, “I am very proud of how Binghe is growing up.”

Luo Binghe’s eyes glimmer. “Mu Shishu is very kind to say so.”

“When this Shishu was feeling poorly, Binghe came every month to help me feel better.” Mu Qingfang says. “All that effort to make me such delicious treats. Binghe…you really helped me, and I am grateful.”

Swallowing hard, Luo Binghe asks in a small voice, “If I may ask Shishu…can I give you a hug?”

Oh, this good boy! Mu Qingfang’s heart is so full! “Of course,” he says, standing up and bracing himself for the way Binghe flings himself into his arms. He runs his hand over Luo Binghe’s hair. “How old are you, to be crying like this? Aren’t you ashamed?” His tone is very gentle.

Luo Binghe shakes his head vigorously and holds on. “Shishu was the first person after my mother died, that cared whether I lived or died. Even Shizun changed after becoming friends with Mu Shishu.”

Mu Qingfang’s heart squeezes. “Binghe….Your Shizun has had a very hard life. No, don’t interrupt. It doesn’t excuse some things, but. It’s very, very hard to -” Mu Qingfang struggles to find the right words.

“To be kind?” Luo Binghe mutters.

“Now, none of that. How can someone learn to be kind if they are never shown even an ounce of kindness, hmm?” Mu Qingfang leans back, and brushes some hair away from Luo Binghe’s face. “And that is how I know Binghe will do great things in this life. Because even at his worst, he was kind.”

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: (is being nice) BTW, MQF knows your a demon
LBH: *freaking out* OMG OMG OMG He'll hate me now!!!

MQF: Loves Binghe! Gives good hugs! Binghe is GOOD!

LBH: So...if things don't work out with Shizun...

Was this chapter softer? Less Angsty? I hope so! I have had enough angst for awhile. The next chapter will include a time skip!

what's going on?

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: Aphrodisiac pollen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next month passes without incident, thankfully. Mu Qingfang spends a good amount of time with Shen Qingqiu and the relationship feels solid. He still has moments when he wonders if Shen Shixiong will just come to his senses one day and decide that it's not worth the hassle to court Mu Qingfang.

When those moments of insecurity hit, Mu Qingfang takes the letter that Shen Qingqiu wrote him out, and reads through it again. Sometimes Mu Qingfang wonders if this would be easier if he didn't still have modern sensibilities. He wishes for a cell phone and the ability to text Shen Qingqiu whenever he feels like it.

Shen Qingqiu keeps his word to Luo Binghe and arranges for him to visit Bai Zhan peak three times a week for lessons with Liu Qingge. Binghe must be quite busy, Mu Qingfang thinks, because he hasn't seen hide nor hair of the boy since the late night visit a few weeks ago.

And he doesn't have a good excuse to bother Liu Qingge about it, so Mu Qingfang is left to pick over crumbs of information Shen Qingqiu brings up. One evening while they're both doing Peak Lord paperwork in the bamboo house, Shen Qingqiu mentions that he checked in with Liu Qingge recently. Apparently the War God was surprised that Luo Binghe was advancing so fast. *As befitting the Protagonist*, Mu Qingfang thinks smugly. Shen Qingqiu goes on to mention that Liu Qingge has permission to take Luo Binghe on a nighthunt soon to see how he does against real monsters.

Knowing that he will face real, high level monsters at the conference, Mu Qingfang thinks that's a good idea.

The following two weeks after that conversation are filled with preparation for the conference, meetings with his senior disciples regarding which juniors they think should come and some surprise visits to the Healing Garden behind the main pavilion to bother the kids working there.

Mu Qingfang *loves* surprising them with his presence and the uncensored comments they make to him. A sample of things the children have mentioned:

Are you going to marry Shen Shibo? (He doesn't know! Maybe! He doesn't tell the kids this and just says, it's between him and Shen Shibo)
Can Wu Yanshin adopt me? (That's a new one to Mu Qingfang! You should definitely ask her!)
Can you take us to the market down the mountain? (The children want to buy treats! Adorable!)
Can we see your special secret garden? (No! Mu Qingfang doesn't want anymore incidents like the time his little strays started feeding dead birds to his demonic plants)
Can Luo Shixiong come visit us? (This one's a maybe, because it seems like Luo Binghe is incredibly busy now.)
Can we come with you to the big conference? (Absolutely NOT!)

Anyway, long story short, Mu Qingfang is busy, things are going pretty good with Shen Qingqiu and he continues to worry about Shang Qinghua and Luo Binghe. But life is what it is, and Mu Qingfang gets a little bogged down with the day to day work of being not only a doctor but also a Peak Lord.

Liu Qingge leaves the mountain on a nighthunt, taking Luo Binghe with him. Shen Shixiong, though he tries to pretend that he doesn't care, is fretful. (Well, Mu Qingfang would call it fretful. Shen Qingqiu just says that he's appropriately concerned.)

Several days later, Mu Qingfang is urgently called to Qing Jing peak in later afternoon as one of the hallmasters reported that Shen Qingqiu was fighting Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe was attempting to intervene.

"What the fuck!" Mu Qingfang cries. He scrambles up from his chair in his office, and draws his sword. Why is he always having to run around like a maniac!

The closer he gets to Qing Jing peak he sees the bright sword glares, and hears the clang of metal striking metal. He follows the light show and finds Shen Qingqiu trying to kill Liu Qingge.

Liu Qingge for his part, looks like he's already been punched in the face. Luo Binghe is slumped against a tree with blood trickling from his mouth. Mu Qingfang doesn't think he's able to stop them, so he activates his emergency talisman calling the sect leader to this location. While he's waiting for Yue Qingyuan, he crouches down and scans Binghe.

The boy-well, he's a man now, isn't he? He-oh, what the fuck? Mu Qingfang thinks. Luo Binghe is still under the influence of aphrodisiac poisoning! It's been treated though, and he probably doesn't need another round of medical sex.

Swiveling his head around, Mu Qingfang looks at Liu Qingge more closely. His face is flushed and what he thought might have been a slap mark is just…flushed cheeks. Wait….*Did Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe?????* "Oh my god," he mutters.

Next to him, Binghe flinches. "Mu Shishu…I couldn't help it." Mu Qingfang just sighs and passes some spiritual energy to soothe his symptoms.

“You’ll be fine, Binghe.” Mu Qingfang stands up, squinting. Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge have disappeared somewhere in the bamboo forest. He winces. That’s…not great for Liu Qingge since Shen Qingqiu is entirely capable of using every single leaf in there as a bladed weapon.

A harsh whistling sounds overhead and Mu Qingfang looks up to see a bright flash darting across the sky, heading right toward the other two peak lords. Is that the Sect Leader? Badass!

Abruptly, the distant sounds of fighting stop. A bright crane shaped qi messenger lands on Mu Qingfang’s shoulder. Yue Qingyuan’s voice says, “Mu Shidi if you could join us with all haste.”

Using qinggong, Mu Qingfang propels himself across Qing Jing peak. It’s easy to find where he’s going. The bamboo is utterly flattened and there’s a great divot in the earth like somebody got dragged through here at speed. Once more bounce and he lands close to where Yue Qingyuan is standing. Yue Shixiong has both of his arms extended out and loaded with qi in case either of his Shidi’s decide to continue their fight. Both Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge are on the ground, while Yue Qingyuan looks both annoyed and fond.

Uh. Sect leader? Mu Qingfang feels like that’s probably not the right mix of emotions called for!

A quick non-invasive scan shows that Liu Qingge has been recently treated for aphrodisiac poisoning. Ah, Mu Qingfang realizes. Clearly, Luo Binghe treated him. *Oh good gods,*, Mu Qingfang thinks. For all that Shen Qingqiu acts like Luo Binghe isn’t his best disciple, he can kind of understand why he went after Liu Qingge about this.

Shen Qingqiu is merely depleted of qi, but not significantly injured. He looks absolutely *furious* and the bamboo leaves in his vicinity quiver with the force of his anger.

“I’m going to check Liu Qingge first,” Mu Qingfang says out loud, and when no one protests, crosses the new clearing to the war god. Liu Qingge is covered with dirt, so he must have been the one that either got dragged or thrown away with such force to create. The Bai Zhan peak lord is propped up on his hands, legs still sprawled. He’s glaring viciously at Shen Qingqiu.

Close up, he feels the heat pouring from Liu Qingge. Mu Qingfang steals a glimpse at his face, set in a hard expression. Sweat beads at his hairline. Mu Qingfang presses his fingers against Liu Qingge’s wrist, and performs a deep scan. Liu Qingge’s qi responds sluggishly and Mu Qingfang notes the effect of the recently treated poison. He suspects that Luo Binghe treated him and then they returned to the mountain intending to come to Qian Cao.

“Liu Shixiong is still suffering the effects of the poison,” Mu Qingfang says. “I need to get him to my peak for treatment.”

Green eyes narrowing, Shen Qingqiu struggles to sit up. “He’s *already* been treated,” he snarls. “*My disciple is not going to be his personal fuck toy*.” The nearby leaves start vibrating more aggressively with the force of his anger.

“Shen Shidi,” Yue Qingyuan soothes. “Technically, Luo Binghe is an adult-”

“Shut. Up. Right. Now.” Shen Qingqiu says through gritted teeth. “Mu Shidi get that-that *brute* off my peak this instant!” He looks at Liu Qingge. “If you so much as *look* at my disciple the wrong way, I’ll kill you.”

“*Okay*,” Mu Qingfang says. “Everyone take a breath. Liu Shixiong, come on, up you go.” Exerting his qi to help him move the bulky mass of the War God, he manages to get Liu Shixiong to his feet and up onto Mu Qingfang’s sword. “Binghe will need to be seen a little later,” he calls, “And so do *you*, Shen Shixiong.” He’s not expecting an answer, but a desultory “Fine,” reaches his ears.

Then they’re in the air.

Mu Qingfang quickly gets Liu Qingge dragged into an exam room. It’s the one he usually uses when he’s forced to come to Qian Cao. After helping him up onto the bed, Mu Qingfang asks, “Did you ever get your form filled out?”

Liu Qingge’s flushed cheeks just get redder. He looks the other way, making Mu Qingfang roll his eyes in exasperation. He’s only been telling his martial siblings for how many years now that they need to get the paperwork filed!

“I meant to,” Liu Qingge says to the wall, ignoring Mu Qingfang completely.

Withholding a sigh, Mu Qingfang asks, “Do you have a preference for partner?”

Liu Qingge opens his mouth then shuts it again without saying anything. He continues staring at the wall. “I don’t understand how it was this bad.”

“Well, any idea what the poison was from?” Mu Qingfang asks, leaning against a wall.

“Kirin-leeches,” Liu Qingge mutters.

Mu Qingfang runs a palm over his face. Kirin-leeches were *known* to have saliva that was an extremely *potent* aphrodisiac poison! They were half water dragon with the ability to latch on to their prey and suck it dry of blood. “I see.”

Liu Qingge sighs, closing his eyes and crossing his arms over his chest. “Look, it wasn’t something *planned*, okay? We were flying around looking for a hunt and passed over a river *filled* with them! Were we supposed to just let them poison all the water for the local settlements? Luo Binghe was supposed to be a distraction, flying low over the river and then flying fast enough to outrun them when they shoot the poison. But-” Agitated, he tugs on the end of his ponytail. “I was-I got distrac-*anyway*, one of them came up on the river bank and got me, and then Luo Binghe tried to *help* and he got hit too--- it was a mess.”

“And…the subsequent activities were…consensual?” Mu Qingfang says as gently as he can.

“Yes!” Liu Qingge roars. “It just….it just *happened*, no need to make a big fuss.” He looks anywhere except at Mu Qingfang.

Mu Qingfang runs a different scan this time, looking for any tears or wounds that may need healing. Even stunted, Liu Qingge’s cultivation is powerful enough that it’s…a little strange that he got caught unawares by poisoned saliva. This is the same war god who for *years* came home fully sex pollened and his only treatment was beating up his disciples.

Narrowing his eyes, he thinks that Liu Qingge’s story doesn’t make enough sense. However. Mu Qingfang’s not sure that pushing him on the matter would be helpful either.

The sound of crashes and shouting gets Mu Qingfang’s attention. “Liu Shixiong, I’m going to send in head disciple Wu to check you periodically.” He sends a quick qi message to Wu Yanshin, leaving the room to follow the sound of loud voices.

Naturally, he finds Shen Qingqiu physically dragging Luo Binghe down one of the hallways to an empty exam room. Xie Yanmei trails them, a particularly long suffering expression in place. “Shizun,” She greets. “Lovely day we’re having.”

“Have you heard?” Mu Qingfang asks.

“Oh, yes,” she says grimly. “Shen Shibo was quite-” She huffs. “*Loud*. Shizun, do you want me to take this case?”

Well, Mu Qingfang isn’t sure that he should necessarily be the one taking care of his lover and a boy who might as well be a son or a nephew to him. “I’ll talk to them, and call you.”

“Yes, Shizun.” Xie Yanmei says on a sigh. “I will stay nearby.”

Steeling himself for what will likely be an unpleasant interview, Mu Qingfang enters the room.

“Finally,” Shen Qingqiu mutters. He still looks pissed off, but apparently giving Liu Qingge a beating has improved his mood significantly. Shen Qingqiu paces around the room like a caged tiger, while Luo Binghe sits on the bed with his knees drawn up to his chest.

“Shen Shixiong, may I scan you?” Mu Qingfang asks, like he didn’t fall asleep last night wrapped around his back, and kissing his neck.

Shen Qingqiu exhales heavily. He jerks up the sleeve of his robe and offers his wrist.

A quick scan shows no broken bones, although he has a lot of bruising around his right hand. More importantly, he wasn’t incidentally exposed via touch to the poison. His cultivation is strong and stable. “Your hand is swollen,” Mu Qingfang says, releasing his grip. “Circulate your qi, and it should be fine. Now, Shen Shixiong if you would excuse us-”

“No.” Shen Qingqiu says flatly.

Mu Qingfang takes his arm, leads him to the doorway and hastily throws up a silencing array. “Look, he’s not going to be honest with you standing over him like a mother bear.”

“Shidi!”

“Don’t *Shidi* me, A-Jiu. Go wait outside, I'll come find you when we’re done here.” Mu Qingfang says firmly.

After a glance at his disciple, who appears way too meek, Shen Qingqiu presses his lips together and then nods. “Fine.” He turns and leaves, closing the door behind him. Mu Qingfang releases the privacy array and gives his full attention to Luo Binghe.

“All right, Binghe. First, are you all okay?” Mu Qingfang watches him closely.

Luo Binghe looks at his hands where he’s picking at his nails. “Yes, Shishu. I’m fine.” He doesn’t offer anything else and Mu Qingfang waits in silence. “Is-Is Liu Shishu fine?”

“Yes, Liu Qingge is fine.” Mu Qingfang crosses his arms over his chest. “Somehow he got distracted while you were flying overhead? At least. That’s what he said. It seems odd, don’t you think, that the War God of Bai Zhan peak became distracted on a hunt.”

Binghe winces a bit. He bites his lip and looks down, the very picture of guilt!

“What did you *do*?” Mu Qingfang says.

Hesitantly, Binghe explains that, “I didn’t *mean* to get distracted in the air, it’s just that I stopped and stole a glance at Liu Shishu because-” His cheeks flush a dark pink.

Binghe! Did you accidentally get Liu Qingge *and* yourself sex pollened because he was too pretty to look away from!? Mu Qingfang rubs his forehead and regrets his life choices. “Binghe, that…that can’t happen again, okay? Look, I get it, Liu Qingge is really pretty! But you were on a *mission* and he *trusted* you to do a job.”

“I know, Mu Shishu,” Binghe says miserably. “I swear, I didn’t do it on purpose! It’s just…” He shrugs helplessly. “He’s Liu Qingge! And he was being so-” Luo Binghe waves a hand in the air. “You know.”

He actually *doesn’t* Binghe! And he’s not sure he *wants* to!

“He was doing the thing with his sword.” Luo Binghe says, and Mu Qingfang desperately needs him to *shut up*.

“Okay! Well! You better convince your Shizun that whatever happened was consensual, otherside he *will* be out for Liu Qingge’s blood.”

“But Liu Shishu didn’t do anything wrong!” Luo Binghe protests.

Mu Qingfang closes his eyes for a moment. He suddenly has a lot more empathy for Shen Qingqiu’s constant exasperation with regard to Luo Binghe. Is this what it’s like having a teenager? Shen Yuan feels pretty sure he wasn’t this troublesome. “Binghe,” he says with dwindling patience, “get some rest. Circulate your qi and drink lots of water.”

He steps out of the room and nearly walks into Shen Qingqiu, who apparently has been pacing up and down the hallway. Mu Qingfang catches a glimpse of Xie Yanmei peeking around the corner, giving him a distinct 'shoo-ing' motion with her hands. "Come to my office," he tells Shen Qingqiu and starts walking.

He leads Shen Qingqiu into his office and gestures at the chair. Mu Qingfang means to sit behind the desk but Shen Qingqiu catches his robes and tugs Mu Qingfang right down into his lap. *Ah, A-Jiu,* Mu Qingfang thinks, wrapping his arms around the other man's shoulders and letting him press his face into Mu Qingfang's neck.

"That pig tried to steal my little cabbage," Shen Qingqiu says into Mu Qingfang's skin.

"That little cabbage is a grown man now," Mu Qingfang replies.

Shen Qingqiu sits up. His expression is distressed. "How in the *world* did this happen? Liu Qingge and I will never be friends, but I never thought-" He swallows. "Is Binghe all right?"

"He's fine." Mu Qingfang assures him. *Except for his guilty conscience*. He kind of wonders what exactly Liu Qingge was doing to catch Binghe's attention so thoroughly. From the stammering way that Liu Qingge had discussed the situation, Mu Qingfang was pretty sure something wasn't adding up. Still. Both of them were very clear that it was consensual so…

If Luo Binghe is *really* having some kind of affair with *Liu Qingge* of all people, who is Mu Qingfang to get between them? They're both adults, though the fact that Liu Qingge is a Peak Lord increases the weirdness factor. He can't judge about the age difference because technically (LOL) *Mu Qingfang* is just a few years older than Binghe and Shen Qingqiu is probably in his early forties. He's definitely not giving Shen Qingqiu any more details than the bare bones.

*The thing he was doing with his sword...*was Liu Qingge…*showing off*?! Nope! No way! Mu Qingfang refuses to think about this further!

He rises from Shen Qingqiu's lap, ignoring the little sound of protest that A-Jiu makes. "Let's go back to mine. *You're* getting some calming tea."

"I don't *need* calming tea," Shen Qingqiu complains sulkily, like a little kid, and Mu Qingfang suffers a fresh onslaught of affection for this man.

"Well, you're getting it anyway," Mu Qingfang says, grinning. "Doctor's orders."

Chapter End Notes

LQG: SQQ's disciple isn't that bad, and he should have been *mine* to begin with
LBH: ...Did we know that Liu Shishu is beautiful?

LQG: Gets distracted watching Binghe flying majestically on his sword
LBH: Gets distracted by Liu Qingge watching him and falls off sword *Directly* into the river fills with monsters which use sex-pollen
LQG and LBH: drag themselves out of the river
LBH: throws himself at LQG
LQG : "*OH*"

And they work out the pollen, only belatedly realizing that *everyone* is going to know when they come back

LBH: we should go to QJP first
LQG: ...if you say so....
SQQ: Oh, someone wants to get FUCKED UP

Hellooo!!! You will notice that updates will probably come closer to a couple times a week instead of every day (Seriously I don't know how I did that for like THREE WEEKS!)

Come tell me what you think!!

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: none I can think of

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mu Qingfang finds himself in the strange position of having to reassure Shen Qingqiu that Luo Binghe is fine. He'd always suspected that Shen Qingqiu cared about the boy more than he let on, but the way A-Jiu was complaining about Liu Qingge trying to steal his best disciple you'd think that Binghe was Shen Qingqiu's favorite, when he was decidedly *not*.

The next peak lord meeting was pretty awkward though, with Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge ignoring the shit out of each other. Yue Shixiong kept pausing as if to allow space for those two to yell at each other and it kept…not happening.

Luo Binghe was forbidden from training on Bai Zhan peak, but Mu Qingfang strongly suspects that Liu Qingge has been providing some instruction nonetheless. Shen Qingqiu couldn't be everywhere all at once, naturally, and let's face it. If the Protagonist wanted something badly enough, it *was* going to happen.

The Conference looms and although Mu Qingfang would prefer to avoid thinking about it altogether, he really has no choice in the matter. On that topic, he's visited Shang Qinghua a few times. The first visit after the debacle with Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe went exactly as one might think.

A few days after the uh, incident, Mu Qingfang barges into Shang Qinghua's leisure house because nine times out of ten, he can be found near or under a pile of paperwork.

Shang Qinghua looks up from his desk, writing brush sticking out of his hair, and dark circles under his eyes. "*Bro*." He lays down the brush he's holding and rubs his eyes, smearing ink across his face. "What the fuck happened with Liu Qingge and my son?"

Mu Qingfang rolls his eyes and plunks himself down in the chair opposite the desk. "Well. Your *son* is a man now, I guess."

A loud screeching noise fills the room. "What the fuck," Shang Qinghua breathes. "How did *that* happen?"

"Wait a second, aren't you the one that usually knows *everything*?" Mu Qingfang says incredulously.

“Listen, do you have any idea how *busy* shit is right now? Bro, I’m *drowning*.” Shang Qinghua widens his eyes. “I barely sleep and when I *do* it’s nothing but a continuation of the day’s work.” He shudders. “It’s awful. Anyway, give me the juicy gossip.”

Mu Qingfang feels like as long as he relays what is commonly known it’s not breaching confidentiality. “They went on a mission, ran across some river dragon type thing that’s *known* for using aphrodisiac pollen, got distracted, Luo Binghe fell in the river-” At this point Mu Qingfang can’t help heaving a deep sigh at the general ridiculousness of it all. “So of course Liu Qingge had to go save him. They were both infected and uh. Treated each other.”

As expected, Shang Qinghua laughs and laughs until he dissolves into helpless giggles. “How angry was Shen Qingqiu?”

Smiling wryly, Mu Qingfang says, “He’s *still* pissed about it. After he dragged Liu Qingge into the bamboo forest -flattening a lot of it, by the way, it’s a good thing bamboo grows so fast-I thought for sure he was going to cut Liu Qingge to ribbons. Yue Shixiong had to come get in the middle of that shit show.” Frowning, Mu Qingfang adds, “Shen Qingqiu still isn’t speaking to Yue Qingyuan either.”

Snickering, Shang Qinghua says, “It’s a good thing he has his own emotional support Peak Lord already isn’t it?”

Mu Qingfang flicks a tiny burst of qi at him, and Shang Qinghua yelps and ducks.

“So violent! Mu Shidi, *why*?” Shang Qinghua whines.

He checks Shang Qinghua’s meridians before he leaves. “Airplane, you seriously need to take care of yourself. I will intervene with the sect leader if you don’t start eating and resting more.” Although it may not do that much good, given how stupid Yue Shixiong was about Shang Qinghua nearly killing himself with rebuilding the bridges.

Shang Qinghua sighs. “Cucumber bro …. My System still insists that Luo Binghe has to fall into the Abyss. Like, I’m trying my best with Mobei Jun to have him focus on the Huan Hua Palace contingent and to leave Cang Qiong alone mostly, but…” He shakes his head. “I can only do so much without getting killed.”

Mu Qingfang doesn’t have a good answer, and ends up leaving without any kind of resolution.

Soon after that his relationship with Shen Qingqiu hits a bit of a snag.

Ever since Shen Qingqiu came out of seclusion, Mu Qingfang hasn’t attempted to ask about sex at all. The first time when he’d brought it up, Shen Qingqiu had just wanted to be physically close, and that was fine! It was great! Mu Qingfang *loves* kissing and cuddling.

It’s just that…sometimes, he would really like an orgasm here and there. And he’s not about to rub one out while Shen Qingqiu is lying next to him. So Mu Qingfang gets in the habit of holding Shen Qingqiu until he falls asleep, and then slipping out to the bathroom where he-takes care of things.

This is just something that Mu Qingfang will deal with, no big! At least that's what he *thinks*.

He returns to the bed one night after giving himself some relief only for Shen Qingqiu to roll over facing him, looking way too upset for someone that was asleep!

"What's wrong?" Mu Qingfang asks, getting back into bed.

"*You tell me.*" Shen Qingqiu snarls.

Startled at the sudden vitriol, Mu Qingfang can't find any words. "Uh?"

"Am I so disgusting that you'd rather jerk off in the other room than have sex with *me*?" Shen Qingqiu demands, scowling.

"What are you- of course you're not *disgusting*, you're fucking *gorgeous*!" Mu Qingfang retorts. Shen Qingqiu's expression *twists*. Oh no, Mu Qingfang realizes. He's really *hurt* him.

"A-Jiu, listen, *please*, I thought that you didn't want to have sex with *me*, I wasn't going to push my desires on you, if you don't-"

Shen Qingqiu stares at him like he's an idiot. Which he might be! Apparently! "When have I *ever* said I don't want you?" He shifts, sitting up properly, and crossing his arms over his chest.

"After you came out of seclusion, when we made up, that night I tried, and you…" Mu Qingfang's voice fades. It still stings a little. He remembers how much he'd *wanted* and Shen Qingqiu just brushed him off.

"Well, forgive me for wanting to take things a little slowly, since you were barely talking to me at the time! I thought you were testing me!"

Mystified, Mu Qingfang can only say, "Huh? Why would I be testing you?"

Scowl deepening, Shen Qingqiu says, "To make sure that I kept my word. That I was *serious* about everything I said in the letter." After a moment he adds, "It's not like you mentioned anything I wrote in there again."

Okay, what the fuck? Mu Qingfang is starting to get a little pissed now himself! He gets out of bed, stomps over to the wardrobe where he'd carelessly tossed his robes. He leans down and roots through the fabric until he finds what he's looking for. He turns around, facing Shen Qingqiu, and shakes the handful of pages at him. "You mean *this* letter? The one I walk around with because sometimes it seems…" *like you didn't really mean that 'court with the intention of a permanent romantic relationship business'.*

"...Why are you carrying that around?" Shen Qingqiu asks. He at least seems like he's willing to listen now.

Mu Qingfang bites his lip. He looks down at his hand where he's unconsciously crumpled the papers a little. He smoothes them out and folds them over neatly. He tosses them on the night table and gets back into bed, facing Shen Qingqiu. "It made me feel better," he says finally.

Frowning, Shen Qingqiu says cautiously, “And what did you need to feel better about?” He cocks his head to the side and stares at Mu Qingfang. “Something I did upset you?”

Mu Qingfang looks away.

“Or…was it something I *didn’t* do?” Now Shen Qingqiu just sounds resigned. “A-Yuan would do well to remember *that I can’t actually read his mind*.”

Fuck. Well, it looks like Mu Qingfang is going to have to talk about his feelings. He makes himself meet Shen Qingqiu’s eyes. “I liked what you wrote in your letter. It made me feel like you really cared about me.”

Shen Qingqiu narrows his eyes. “Because I do.” Then his eyes widen. “Oh,” he breathes. “You doubted me?”

“Sometimes it’s nice to hear the words,” Mu Qingfang says finally, only to realize that he hasn’t exactly been telling Shen Qingqiu how *he* feels all the time *either*. And, looking back, didn’t Shen Qingqiu tell him that no one has ever directed words of love to him? Fuck, the only time Mu Qingfang mentioned loving Shen Qingqiu was when he muttered, “I can’t believe I fell in love with you.” And that was *right* after he’d come out of seclusion when things were so-awful and confusing.

He runs a hand over his face, admitting, “I need to be better about it, too.” Mu Qingfang swallows his nerves and says bluntly, “So I want you to know that I *love* you.”

Shen Qingqiu’s lips part in surprise and for a moment he looks stunned. Mu Qingfang reaches out and presses a finger gently over Shen Qingqiu’s lips.

“You don’t have to say anything. You don’t need to do anything. I just wanted you to know. That. That I do.” Mu Qingfang pulls his hand back, except an iron grip wraps around his wrist.

Leaning forward, Shen Qingqiu says hoarsely, “What if I want to say something?”

Mu Qingfang meets his eyes. “Then I would listen.”

“And if I want to say-” Shen Qingqiu takes a deep breath. “That I--I love you?”

Words hit his tongue before he’s even conscious of thinking them, “Then I would say that I love you, too.”

“What if I said I had a courting gift for you but was just…unsure about if you wanted it?” Shen Qingqiu says softly, meeting Mu Qingfang’s eyes.

“Then I would accept it,” Mu Qingfang tells him, raising his free hand to Shen Qingqiu’s face and drawing a thumb gently across his cheek.

“And if I told A-Yuan that I don’t want him to hide away from me when he’s unsure about asking something?” Shen Qingqiu reaches out, and using just a little bit of Qi, pulls Mu Qingfang across the bed until he’s half on top of Shen Qingqiu.

“Then I would try,” Mu Qingfang whispers, staring into Shen Qingqiu’s eyes.

“Then *try*,” Shen Qingqiu urges him, plunging his hand into Mu Qingfang’s hair and holding him.

It feels like he’s on the edge of a cliff, Mu Qingfang thinks. But Shen Qingqiu is out here with him, and they’re both *trying*. Shen Yuan is a millennial at heart and maybe Shen Qingqiu still thinks of himself as a street rat deep down inside. Shen Yuan-for all that he’s kind of afraid of it-also wants to *connect* to be *understood*, and he can’t do that if he doesn’t speak his truth.

So Shen Yuan *jumps*, and Mu Qingfang says, “I didn’t understand *wanting* someone until I met you. I didn’t expect- and then-” His brain stutters and he completely loses his train of thought. Mu Qingfang continues with, “And I really like kissing you! I want to touch you all over, and make you feel *good*, and I keep thinking about the time I got poisoned and the way you fucked me, and how amazing it felt, and I-I can’t help wanting that again.” He swallows and his gaze drops. “It really is okay, if you don’t feel the same about sex, but it’s just kind of lonely taking care of-you know- by myself, and-”

Shen Qingqiu leans in and kisses the words away. He pulls back slowly, then presses their foreheads together. “I like kissing you. I want to touch you and make you feel good. I think about it too. If I don’t feel like having sex, then I can hold you while you masturbate.” He leans back a little so he can look Mu Qingfang in the eyes. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to hide any part of yourself from me.”

Much, much later, long after Shen Qingqiu has proved the truth of his words, he holds Mu Qingfang tightly, while the sweat cools on their skin. Mu Qingfang is thoroughly fucked out, a little sore, a lot tired, and feeling fully loved up.

When he’s nearly asleep, Shen Qingqiu says softly into his ear, “You can’t leave me now, A-Yuan. Don’t make me any promises….just don’t leave, no matter how angry I make you, or when I fuck up. Just…*please*.”

Still aware enough to tighten his arms and rub the sole of his foot over Shen Qingqiu’s leg, Mu Qingfang answers sleepily, “I’m keeping you.”

Nearly a month later, Mu Qingfang thinks to himself that everything he is learning about Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge is completely non consensual!

Liu Qingge pays Mu Qingfang a visit, but not at the Healing Pavilion, no, why would he? Instead, Mu Qingfang gets the pleasure of having his door kicked in one morning before he’s even had his first cup of tea!

The explosion of wood fragments into his house startles Mu Qingfang so badly he drops the ceramic teapot onto the floor. Clenching his jaw, Mu Qingfang says tightly, “Liu Shixiong, I hope you’re dying.”

“There’s something wrong with me,” Liu Qingge informs him, not moving from the doorway.

Mu Qingfang, who had been in the kitchen preparing to fill the teapot with water, eyes the wreckage in his entryway. “*Clearly*,” he says. “What’s the problem?” He might as well answer his questions so he can return to finding some fucking caffeine! Also, can he thank the gods in heaven that Shen Qingqiu hadn’t slept over last night? Fuck, that would have been *bad*.

Instead of answering, Liu Qingge frowns mightily. He struggles for words. After several minutes of this, Mu Qingfang says, “Can we get a topic at least?”

That nets him a fierce glare from the war god. “I must be poisoned,” Liu Qingge says, and Mu Qingfang strongly considers pulling a Van Gogh and cutting off his ears.

Sadly for his sanity, he knows *exactly* where this is going. Mu Qingfang crosses the room and takes Liu Qingge’s wrist. As he suspected, “You’re not poisoned.”

“Then why do I-!” Liu Qingge’s face turns an alarming shade of red.

Mu Qingfang crosses his arms and prepares to play twenty questions. “Why do you what? Want sex now?” He’s just taking a guess but apparently struck true because Liu Qingge looks relieved and nods. Running a hand over his face, Mu Qingfang says, “Liu Shixiong, was the, ah, incident with Luo Binghe your first experience with sex?”

Unable to meet his eyes, Liu Qingge looks away, but nods firmly.

“You’re just horny,” Mu Qingfang says bluntly. “Have you tried masturbating?”

Liu Qingge gives him brief eye contact, before averting his gaze. “Mn.”

“I’m guessing that you don’t want to have sex with anyone *else*?” *Besides Luo Binghe,* is strongly implied.

Pressing his lips together tightly, Liu Qingge silently shakes his head.

Mu Qingfang is pretty sure that Binghe would be delighted with this knowledge. To allow some plausible deniability, he says delicately, “Have you tried talking to him about it?”

“How can I?” Oh dear gods, Liu Qingge sounds *sad*.

Internally, Mu Qingfang’s brain is crying *what the fuck, what the fuck* over and over. “I’m not getting in the middle of this,” he says flatly. “You’re both adults, and it’s not technically against any rules.” He knows this unwillingly, because Shen Qingqiu had indeed looked it up and was bitter about it. “Just send him a qi message.” Mu Qingfang has to admit, back when he was Shen Yuan, that he *never* could have imagined having this talk with Liu Qingge!

Straightening Liu Qingge says, “And say *what*?”

Again, Mu Qingfang has the sense memory of being in lower secondary school overhearing girls talking about boys they liked. He is willing to swear in front of a judge they had this *exact fucking conversation*! Mu Qingfang wants a raise! Wishing for a nice convenient amnesia plot, he says, “If you like him tell him that. If you want to get to know him better, tell him, *that*. Binghe is a good person.” All right, he can’t help adding that last bit. Binghe is good!

Maybe once he’s a little older this might be a good match? He’ll have to suss out exactly how much Liu Qingge hates demons just in case. But not today!

“If that’s all, I have to get ready to see patients,” Mu Qingfang says, and then adds, “I’m charging your peak for the door repair.”

Before Mu Qingfang knows it, it’s time to leave for the Conference. Horseback riding was a skill thankfully included in the download, because Shen Yuan certainly had no clue. He found that his legs and arms simply acted without his conscious input, but he didn’t have any issue with the horse. Xie Yanmei rides at his side with a couple more senior disciples and four competent juniors.

Shen Qingqiu and his disciples ride near the front of the procession. Zhangmen Shixiong leads the way, naturally, and Liu Qingge had ignored propriety, keeping pace with the sect leader.

Mu Qingfang wanted nothing to do with the precarious *whatever* that was happening with Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe. Imagining Liu Qingge with Mu Qingfang’s favorite disciple was vaguely nauseating so he tried at all costs to NOT think about it. Fortunately, Shen Qingqiu *also* wanted nothing to do with any of that.

Luo Binghe was in theory supposed to stay grounded on Qing Jing peak, but in reality he was sneaking off for ‘lessons’ with Liu Qingge. Listen, Mu Qingfang thinks the less he knows about it the better.

It takes a few days to get to Jue di Gorge and then it’s a whole tedious process to get the sects and disciples in place. Shen Qingqiu is occupied making nice with Huan Hua’s palace master and a bunch of other sect leaders. Mu Qingfang, as a healer, gets to lay low for the most part and focuses on making sure his disciples have what they need in order to treat whatever injuries may come up.

Knowing that the Conference was going to be attacked by demons left Mu Qingfang in a bad place, mentally. He couldn’t tell his disciples because he had no good reason to have the information he had. He had already provided a secret qiankun pouch to Luo Binghe which

included *another* qiankun pouch with food and water, a spare sword, several knives, a packet of tea leaves, and two good thick blankets and robes with protective arrays sewn into them by Shang Qinghua himself. Of course, Mu Qingfang included basic medical supplies.

He truly hoped that it was unnecessary, but it was something he simply had to do. He didn't even have a good explanation to give Binghe other than he worried about him, and wanted him to be able to protect himself in the event things went sideways.

Binghe had given him a long look and then engulfed him in a hug. "Thanking Mu Shishu," he had said with watery eyes, before making his way back to Qing Jing peak. If Mu Qingfang happened to notice him heading for the rainbow bridge connection to Bai Zhan peak, *no he didn't*!

Once the conference starts and the disciples enter the competition area, Mu Qingfang quickly becomes distracted with things like people having bad reactions to food, or incidental poisonings. As the attendees are all cultivators it's not difficult to treat them.

There's vendors selling what amounts to street food, and every so often Mu Qingfang stops and eats something. Most of the action won't start until dark after all. The hours pass by quickly, especially with Xie Yanmei checking in frequently to update him on the status of their disciples, as well as any gossip.

"Shen Qingqiu bet one thousand spirit stones that Luo Binghe will win the entire thing," she tells him at one point.

Mu Qingfang can only roll his eyes. "Yes, clearly his most disliked disciple," he agrees.

"Zhangmen Shibo offered to pay if Shen Shibo lost the bet, and then Shen Shibo got him to agree that he could keep the spirit stones if Luo Shizhi wins."

Snorting, Mu Qingfang says, "Clever man."

The sun dips below the horizon and then everything goes to hell. River monsters start eating dumbfuck Huan Hua disciples who decided to go *wading* in the middle of the competition.

Shouting erupts from the observation tower where the non competitors watched the competition on large screens. Mu Qingfang himself was several floors down from where Yue Zhangmen and Shen Qingqiu were stationed. He was actually *supposed* to be up there, but he used the excuse of treating sick people to wander about freely.

Shen Qingqiu had no idea that the Conference was going to be attacked, and Mu Qingfang didn't want to be there when he found out. Anyway, once the shit started hitting the fan, Mu Qingfang goes back up to the highest floor. Once he arrives, he finds pandemonium. The crystal screens have all gone dark, spirit eagles mercilessly slaughtered.

The Palace Master demands the entrance array be opened, and Yue Qingyuan steps forward.

"No! Do not open it!" Yue Qingyuan fixes a hard look at the old palace master.

“Unless you want all the monsters to attack the mortals that live in the surrounding area,” Shen Qingqiu says acidly, narrowing his eyes at the Palace Master.

Someone says, “If the enchantment can’t be opened to let them out, then what should be done?”

Shen Qingqiu rolls his eyes. “If exiting can not be done, there can be only entering. Obviously.”

Yue Qingyuan says some rallying words and it’s quickly agreed that the Masters will enter the gorge to assist and protect their disciples.

Liu Qingge, Cheng Luan in hand, restlessly paces while he waits for the entrance array to be readied. Once it’s opened, their war god jumps into the air, his sword shooting out ahead and snapping under his feet.

Shen Qingqiu spies Mu Qingfang and tells him, “Mu Shidi. *Be careful*.”

Ah, this man. “Be careful yourself, Shixiong.” And Mu Qingfang has never been more serious. “I will enter behind you. Go!”

Shen Qingqiu nods once, then disappears through the glowing array. Xie Yanmei, who has somehow materialized at his side, says, “Shizun?”

Mu Qingfang arranges his paralyzing needles where he can reach them quickly and says, “Yanmei, stay here. We will need you when disciples are able to exit. Someone has to be at full strength.”

She looks dismayed, but says, “Yes, Shizun.” Then she adds, “Don’t do anything stupid.”

He snorts. “Besides entering a gorge filled with monsters? I’ll try!”

Chapter End Notes

SQQ TO LBH: I dont want to hear another word about Liu Qingge out of you

LBH: ...okay. I won't tell you, then

LQG: *has an internal crisis* Mu Shidi will know what to do

MQF: I am choosing not to notice any of this.

In case you are wondering, YES I absolutely glossed over the boring stuff before the conference. I have no patience to write so many details if I'm being honest LOL

Come tell me what you think!!

You've got magic inside your fingertips

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: CANON TYPICAL VIOLENCE, Lots of nameless disciples die

I was NICE and didn't end on a cliffhanger, you're WELCOME.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mu Qingfang flies into screams and blood. Gigantic winged creatures dive at him through the air, forcing evasive maneuvers. Helloo! He's not that great of a flier! He survives the fucking huge not-birds with a burst of speed and angling through a thick forest.

This itself is dangerous. Underneath him, disciples are fighting immense snakes that spit fire- some kind of dragon, maybe? Mu Qingfang ignores them. It's terrible, but he's looking for Cang Qiong disciples. He shoots over the river where the Nu Yuan Chan had eaten some Huan Hua disciples and continues over the flood plain in the direction that Luo Binghe had fled.

Something crashes into the ground behind Mu Qingfang and he startles at the sound, nearly falling off his sword. He twists, glancing behind to see what happened. A Bone Eagle shakes out its wings and with two heavy flaps is airborne and chasing him. Great!

Mu Qingfang flies in a series of spirals, making them tighter and tighter until he is near enough to whip his needles at it, paralyzing it instantly. The bone eagle falls to the ground with a BOOM. It's probably not even dead, he thinks, just stunned. Depending on where his needles struck, he may have paralyzed the respiratory organs which would kill it soon. He can hope, anyway.

He flies unmolested for a few minutes, gaze constantly scanning for threats. He hears a cry from down below, and a glance shows him a Xian Shu disciple fighting a demonic python dragon. Nearby, several Xian Shu disciples have erected a qi barrier but this poor kid got stuck outside of it.

Mu Qingfang descends, hopping from his sword from perhaps ten meters in the air, using sword seals to attack the creature. Once his feet hit the ground, he draws forth more needles and shoots them through the (frankly terrifying) vast open maw.

The dragon python freezes and then flops over to the side with a heavy thump. Mu Qingfang finishes it off by beheading the thing. "Come," he says to the girl, and she gives him a desperate look.

Ah, he sees. Her ankle is broken. Mu Qingfang scoops her up and runs to the shelter. “Let her in,” he demands.

“Mu Shibo! Mu Shibo!”

He ignores the cries. “Keep the barrier up. Stay safe!” He leaps into the air, calling his sword to catch him and keeps moving.

The sound of screaming seems to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once. Mu Qingfang pauses in the air, sword turning in a slow circle. Where the fuck is Binghe?! Which way is he meant to go?!

What is he even going to do, for that matter? Shen Yuan wants to panic, and Mu Qingfang ruthlessly pushes it down. Panic later, he tells himself. Just keep moving!

He flies.

He discovers a couple of Huan Hua disciples hiding in trees. They seem to be safe for the moment-

Then they see him and start screaming for help. Almost immediately, a Bone Eagle swoops down and captures them in claws the size of a house. Horrified, Mu Qingfang hears the screams cut off abruptly.

It goes like that. Everyone he finds it seems he arrives just in time to watch them get eaten or slaughtered. Numbness falls over him like a curtain and Mu Qingfang keeps moving. Up ahead he hears more screaming and this time he is able to save a few kids from Ghost Headed Spiders. He uses his needles liberally. They are large for spiders, true, but their bodies are small enough so that one needle is enough for each monster.

Then the ground starts shaking. Oh, no, Mu Qingfang thinks. *The Abyss is opening!*. Is Luo Binghe’s seal broken already? Is he too late, *again*? “If more return, aim for the temples,” he says, and *flies*.

He bursts out of a wooded area straight into a battle. Shen Qingqiu is down on the ground, a puddle of teal and white robes, while Liu Qingge battles Mobei Jun. *Where the fuck is Binghe?*

Mu Qingfang doesn’t call anyone’s name. He’s learned by now that’s an invitation for death. He runs on silent feet to Shen Qingqiu, and scans. He’s alive, but his meridians have taken a full blast of demonic qi. There’s a hole in his upper chest, through and through, like he got pierced with something. Strange-there’s nothing in the wound.

Impaled by ice, perhaps? Mu Qingfang pumps his qi directly to the wound, knitting shredded blood vessels back together, and removing the air in Shen Qingqiu’s chest, allowing his collapsed lung to reinflate. He forces the skin together. It’s not pretty, but it will keep him from bleeding out.

He reaches into his sleeves and withdraws a blood replenishing pill. He forces Shen Qingqiu's mouth open and shoves the pill to the back of his throat with two fingers, then massages his neck helping him swallow.

When he's certain that Shen Qingqiu is stable (ish) Mu Qingfang tries to assess the situation. Where's Binghe? Where's Shang Qinghua? Surely they must be around.

A pebble falls near him, and Mu Qingfang's neck snaps back as he looks up. Luo Binghe and Shang Qinghua are balancing high in the air on Shang Qinghua's sword. Luo Binghe's gaze isn't on *him* of course, it's on-

Liu Qingge cries out.

Mu Qingfang sucks in a breath. Mobei Jun has formed an array of hundreds of ice swords, and thrown them all at the Bai Zhan war god. Liu Qingge is frighteningly fast of course, but even he had difficulty with an opponent that creates portals out of nothing and sends the swords right through, striking him directly in the chest!

"NO!" Luo Binghe *screams* and flings himself off Shang Qinghua's sword. Mobei Jun's attention diverts for a moment away from Liu Qingge.

Mu Qingfang activates a stealth talisman, though he's not sure how much it will work. He's a physician not a warrior for fucks sake, and he's not used to expending his qi on flying around at top speed and *killing monsters*! Not to mention he used a lot of spiritual energy fixing Shen Qingqiu.

Luo Binghe hits the ground and runs toward Liu Qinnge. The ice demon knocks Shang Qinghua out of the air with a pulse of pure demonic qi, and Mu Qingfang watches in horror as his friend hits the ground *hard*. Shang Qinghua doesn't move.

Mu Qingfang is torn. *Which of his martial brothers should he go to?*. Liu Qingge is moving and Shang Qinghua is not. He heads to Shang Qinghua and scans. Fuck, so many broken bones. Almost all the ribs on that side have shattered. He passes as much qi as he dares. His internal organs seem okay though he is severely bruised along his side and flank.

A cry from up ahead gets his attention and Mu Qingfang looks up to see Liu Qingge pinned to the ground by multiple spears of ice, with Luo Binghe standing in front of him, hands to his head as an *enormous* pulse of pure power expands out of him.

The burst of Luo Binghe's demonic qi disintegrates the hundreds of ice spears aimed at him and Liu Qingge making it look like a blizzard all around him. Luo Binghe falls to his knees, clutching his head.

"Binghe!" Liu Qingge cries, desperately, trying to free himself from the spears of ice. He struggles in vain, rocking a little bit side to side, but still stuck. Liu Qingge's face screws up in concentration and Mu Qingfang can feel the way he's gathering his energy.

Mobei Jun strides forward, three meters tall, with a face carved out of stone. Icy blue eyes glow unnaturally, and a blue demon mark shines on his forehead.

“Leave him alone,” Liu Qingge snarls. His hands glow and he directs the force into the spears stuck through his body, trying to melt them.

Carefully, Mu Qingfang creeps closer. He gets close enough to Liu Qingge that he lays a palm on his back and starts channeling qi, helping the war god dissolve the ice spears. It’s working, except…it’s not working *fast enough*.

Beyond them, the Abyss is open, a great rift in the ground, and the far side of it expands as he watches.

“You are not human,” Mobei Jun says with no inflection at all, but Luo Binghe just snarls.

“Fuck you,” Luo Binghe says, and Mu Qingfang wants to run a hand over his face. What! Is! Wrong! With this kid!

Mobei Jun reaches out, and Luo Binghe loads his palm with qi and strikes. It makes Mobei Jun step back a little, but that’s it. Luo Binghe sways on his knees, like he’s trying not to collapse.

“Idiot child,” Mobei Jun says. “This is not the place for you. I told you: you are not *human*.” He reaches out two fingers and presses them into Luo Binghe’s forehead.

Binghe *screams* in pain, and Liu Qingge *explodes* into the air, Cheng Luan in his grip. Liu Qingge’s bleeding from multiple places, but he sends a mighty sword glare at the Demon Lord.

“Leave him alone,” Liu Qingge cries, blocking the flurry of ice spears that Mobei jun sends at him. He drifts back to the ground and then chokes. Liu Qingge looks down at his front where an ice spear has been thrust through, emerging from his stomach. Slowly he sinks to his knees, Cheng Luan falling to the ground at his side, and one hand wrapping around the spear sticking out of his body.

Mu Qingfang stands up and shoots all of his needles toward Mobei Jun. At the last second, Mobei Jun’s head snaps around and Mu Qingfang feels his stealth talisman fail with the surge of demonic energy. Mobei Jun waves a hand and the needles go still in the air and drop to the ground, useless.

Returning his attention to Luo Binghe, Mobei Jun walks over to him entirely unphased. “You don’t belong here,” he says.

“Don’t tell my disciple where he belongs,” Shen Qingqiu says coldly, walking into this scene of horrors. He casually passes Mu Qingfang and then stops right in front of him, deliberately blocking him from the Ice Demon’s sight.

“Shizun,” Binghe says weakly, “Liu Shishu-”

“Is too stubborn to die, idiot boy, *focus!*” Shen Qingqiu sounds *livid*. “You’ve done enough damage here,” he says to Mobei Jun. “Go back to the demon realm.”

Mobei Jun *smiles*. He gestures, and a line of black swords materializes in front of him, aiming at Shen Qingqiu, Mu Qingfang and Liu Qingge. “I don’t mind killing all of you,” the demon lord says, “But the boy, this *demon*, is coming with me.”

Mu Qingfang doesn’t have much energy left, but he gets his hand on Liu Qingge’s body and does what he can. His spiritual energy sputters and-*what*? Is that it? He’s done? No, he thinks, it can’t be. He is not going to SIT HERE and watch Liu Qingge DIE.

Someone help me, he thinks with all of his might. *PLEASE*.

Murderous intent rolls off Shen Qingqiu. “Over my dead body.” Then he’s spinning, forming an array with his hands, shooting it at Mobei Jun. Flames form out of nothing, and cover the ice demon. “Binghe, *run!*”

Luo Binghe gets to his feet, staggers and falls over. He starts trying to crawl to Liu Qingge.

Demonic power pulses away from Mobei Jun, sending the flames right back at Shen Qingqiu who waves his fan, and they disappear. “If you wish,” he says carelessly to Shen Qingqiu. He extends a hand. Ice rushes away from his body, engulfing Shen Qingqiu’s feet and rising up to encase his body up to the neck in pure ice.

Shen Qingqiu struggles but breaking free is impossible.

Mu Qingfang slowly gets to his feet. “Binghe. Run away now.”

But Luo Binghe just looks crushed to see him there. “Mu Shishu,” he says, “I *can’t*.”

Mu Qingfang doesn’t care that his spiritual energy is depleted. That his stronger martial brothers are incapacitated. That this damned ice demon will probably kill him. He’s not letting him take Binghe without a fight!

He takes a step. Then another. Mobei Jun has Luo Binghe by the neck, holding him roughly. “Let him go,” Mu Qingfang says. “Binghe belongs with us, his *family*.”

Mobei Jun looks at him with pity. He lifts his arm.

Mu Qingfang waits, but nothing happens. He blinks once, then twice. Ice crystals form slowly at the end of Mobei Jun’s fingers, and Mu Qingfang doesn’t understand what he’s seeing.

And then his entire body fills with LIGHT.

All at once, Shen Yuan fills up with boundless spiritual energy, ancient knowledge, and terrible compassion. Mu Qingfang’s body moves without Shen Yuan’s direction. He feels like he’s in the backseat right now, looking out through his own eyes.

“Leave now,” Mu Qingfang says. “Before I kill you.”

Chuckling, Mobei Jun says, “Can you? Let’s find out?” He melts into shadow, thrusting Binghe away from him, but Mu Qingfang knows *exactly* where the demon lord will emerge,

and his sword is ready. The blade is made from flame, and the handle glows golden. Mobei Jun looks like he's moving through sand, his movements slowed way down so even Shen Yuan can follow them.

Mu Qingfang ducks spears of ice easily, then uses his sword to shoot flames at Mobei Jun, sending them crawling over the ice demon's skin. The smell of burning flesh fills the air. Mu Qingfang walks forward. His sword flashes and then one of Mobei Jun's hands drops onto the ground, blood spurting after it.

The air whistles and the ice demon looks up. Ah, Zhangmen Shixiong is nearly here. Mu Qingfang smiles coldly. "Either *leave* or *die*." He shrugs. "I don't particularly care *which*."

Holding his stump, Mobei Jun walks backward into a portal and disappears. Behind where he was standing, the Abyss closes up.

"A-Yuan," Shen Qingqiu manages to say. The veins in his neck bulge, and his face is an alarming shade of purple.

"Not quite," Mu Qingfang says almost kindly, walking right by Shen Qingqiu, still encased in ice. He does lay a hand on the ice as he passes, jumpstarting the melting process. He keeps walking until he finds Shang Qinghua on the ground, blood pouring from his seven orifices.

Laying two fingers on Shang Qinghua's forehead, Mu Qingfang murmurs, "Leave now, before I destroy you."

"Shidi?"

Mu Qingfang glances up. "Hello, Zhangmen Shixiong," he says calmly. "Please assist Liu Shixiong while I tend to Shang Shixiong. Shen Qingqiu will be fine when the ice melts."

Mu Qingfang sends his energy directly into Shang Qinghua's head. He finds the infection easily, and carefully burns out all the many strands of power through Shang Qinghua's entire body. He reduces the inflammation in Shang Qinghua's brain and then lays his hand on Shang Qinghua's chest funneling spiritual energy, mending the many broken ribs and treating his pain.

Once that's done, Mu Qingfang straightens. "Yue Zhangmen. It's good to see you again."

Yue Qingyuan blinks. "Ah. Yes." Then he frowns, eyes falling upon Luo Binghe, on his knees close to Liu Qingge.

"He's half heavenly demon," Mu Qingfang says helpfully. "Shen Shixiong and …*I* have been keeping an eye on it. He's fine. Excuse me."

Liu Qingge is in rough shape. Mu Qingfang first melts the rest of the ice spears embedded in his abdomen, then repairs his stomach and large intestine, using qi to clear all the debris that escaped. He mends the peritoneum and brings the fascia together, followed by the skin. On his posterior side, Mu Qingfang carefully disintegrates the bone fragments created when the spear shattered a vertebrae. Then he carefully heals the spinal cord itself, followed by

repairing the three meninges. He tests the nerve fibers and feels the response in Liu Qingge's legs.

Good, Mu Qingfang thinks. He'll be able to walk again after some healing.

At last, he goes to Shen Qingqiu. "Shen Shixiong," Mu Qingfang says. "I'm sorry to meet you again like this." He melts the rest of the ice, and then heals the frostbite underneath. He meets Shen Qingqiu's eyes. "He'll be back in a minute or two," Mu Qingfang reassures him.

Finally, Mu Qingfang goes to Luo Binghe. "Hello, Luo Binghe." He crouches down and smiles. "It's good to meet you."

Luo Binghe blinks in confusion. "Mu…Shishu?"

Mu Qingfang holds out a hand and wiggles it in the air. "Sort of. Let me heal you," he says, and Binghe nods. Fortunately, Binghe's demon blood is now active so things are well on their way to healing. He just needs a little extra energy to help.

"Liu Shishu?" Luo Binghe asks carefully.

"Will be fine," Mu Qingfang assures him. When he's finished healing Luo Binghe he stands up, finding Shen Qingqiu eyeing him carefully. Mu Qingfang glances around at his Cang Qiong family. *Are you ready*? He asks Shen Yuan.

Yeah, think I'm good, Shen Yuan says. *Mu Qing? Thanks.*.

You're welcome, Mu Qing says, then adds sternly. *I'm not saving your asses again. Try harder not to die.*. "Goodbye," he says aloud, and then ascends.

Shen Yuan collapses to the ground.

It's like he's swimming underwater. Everything is far away and unimportant.

Shen Yuan sits on his couch, drinking coffee and staring off into space. He blinks and Luo Binghe is suddenly right next to him, dressed in his Qing Jing robes.

"Binghe!" Shen Yuan greets happily. "How are you doing? All healed up after the conference?"

Luo Binghe squints, tilting his head to the side. "...Mu Shishu?"

"Yeah, of-" Shen Yuan looks down, then laughs. "Oh! Yes, I'm your Mu Shishu, but this is what I looked like *before* I became him."

Luo Binghe looks absolutely *delighted*. “You-you’re close to my age!” He starts laughing. “Shizun is going to be surprised when he finds out.” Looking around, he asks, “Where are we?”

“This is where I lived *before*,” Shen Yuan says easily. He waves a hand to gesture at his apartment.

“Mu Shishu, your hands?” Luo Binghe frowns in concern.

Huh! Shen Yuan had forgotten! He lifts his hands, examining the swollen knuckles, the way his fingers slant off to the side. “Yeah, I had an autoimmune disease that did this,” he says. “It doesn’t hurt right now.” He meets Binghe’s eyes. “Anyway, how are you doing?”

“How am I?! Mu Shishu-” Luo Binghe looks upset. “I-we’ve been so worried about you! You’ve been asleep for *months*!”

“Oh.” Shen Yuan says. He tries to think about what he last remembers. He scrunches up his face and concentrates. “Oh! Mu Qing saved us!” He smiles.

“Shishu…” Luo Binghe’s expression turns serious. “Shizun…Shizun isn’t doing so well.”

Shen Yuan thinks hard. Luo Binghe’s Shizun is--

Shen Qingqiu.

You can’t leave me now, A-Yuan. Don’t make me any promises….just don’t leave, no matter how angry I make you, or when I fuck up. Just…please.”

“A-Jiu,” he breathes. “Binghe…I need you to help me wake up.”

Luo Binghe reaches out and presses two fingers to Shen Yuan’s forehead.

_____

In an empty room in the Healing Pavilion, Mu Qingfang opens his eyes. Alarms start blaring, and he smiles.

Chapter End Notes

MQF:Kills a Bone Eagle and a bunch of Ghost head spiders
MQF: Literally keeps three peak lords alive after grievous injuries

Also MQF : WHY AM I SO USELESS

SQQ to Binghe: Idiot Boy!
MBJ to Binghe: Idiot Boy!
SQQ: Hey!

LBH to SY: OMG Mu SHISHU IS MY AGE!!! *I can't WAIT to tell Shizun*

I dreamed each dream with you

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: FLUFF! SO MUCH FLUFF!

Wu Yanshin and Xie Yanmei exchange glances. Wu Yanshin says, “Oh, don’t worry, Shen Shibo has been a frequent visitor.”

“Why do you sound so annoyed about it?” Mu Qingfang asks, unable to keep from smirking.

“-You either let me back *right now*, or I will *flay the skin from your bones*!” Shen Qingqiu’s voice, raised in anger, carries easily into Mu Qingfang’s room.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Shizun,” Wu Yanshin says judgmentally. “It’s good you finally woke up.” She comes to the bed immediately, and helps Mu Qingfang sit up. “What do you remember?”

Frowning, Mu Qingfang says, “I was talking to Binghe.”

Wu Yanshin blinks. “Oh?” Her voice is perfectly even and Mu Qingfang realizes that he’s just said something weird.

“I…was dreaming about talking to Binghe?” He clarifies carefully. Mu Qingfang looks at his hands. He squeezes them shut and then opens them wide, stretching his fingers. Yes, they’re all pointing in the right direction.

“Is something wrong with your hands, Shizun?” Wu Yanshin asks carefully.

Ah, he realizes. He’s worrying her. Mu Qingfang rests his hands in his lap. “No, everything’s fine. What’s been going on? How long have I been sleeping?”

“A little over three months.” Wu Yanshin says flatly, sounding disapproving. She looks over her shoulder as Xie Yanmei knocks on the doorframe.

“Shizun, you’re awake!” Xie Yanmei smiles. To Wu Yanshin she asks, “Should I-?”

“Not yet,” Wu Yanshin sighs. “We won’t get any peace for days. He’ll keep while we scan him.”

“You two know I can hear you, right?” Mu Qingfang inquires dryly.

“Yanmei, you keep watch while I assess Shizun.” Wu Yanshin perches on the edge of the bed and Mu Qingfang helpfully moves his legs over so she has more room. “Your wrist, Shizun.”

Obediently, he offers his wrist. Wu Yanshin’s crisp qi sweeps through his system. *Oof* Mu Qingfang thinks. *Why does that hurt?*

“The worst of the burns have healed,” Yanshin tells him, meeting his eyes.

“What burns?” Mu Qingfang asks, confused. His skin looks fine!

Her expression becomes stony. “Whatever you did to save everyone in Jue Di Gorge caused extensive damage to your meridians. Fortunately, the damage has been healing on its own.” She presses her lips together for a moment and then adds, “Shizun is *very* lucky he will remain able to cultivate.”

Mu Qingfang nods. “Has Shen Qingqiu been around?” he asks hopefully. “Or Luo Binghe?”

Wu Yanshin and Xie Yanmei exchange glances. Wu Yanshin says, “Oh, don’t worry, Shen Shibo has been a frequent visitor.”

“Why do you sound so annoyed about it?” Mu Qingfang asks, unable to keep from smirking.

“-You either let me back *right now*, or I will *flay the skin from your bones*!” Shen Qingqiu’s voice, raised in anger, carries easily into Mu Qingfang’s room.

“Shixiong!” Mu Qingfang shouts, and Wu Yanshin rolls her eyes.

“Stand back, Shimei,” She says to Xie Yanmei. “Here he comes.”

Mu Qingfang feels the murderous intent long before Shen Qingqiu enters the room. He pauses in the doorway, staring at Mu Qingfang with wide eyes and holds on to the door frame for a long moment.

“Mu Shidi,” Shen Qingqiu breathes. Glancing at the women, he says sharply, “Leave us.” He issues a fierce glare at Yanshi and Yanmei both of whom merely sigh in a long suffering manner and then leave the room, shutting the door behind them.

Once the door has been firmly closed, Shen Qingqiu flash steps across the room and onto the bed. With one foot still on the floor he pulls Mu Qingfang into his arms and squeezes. “A-Yuan,” he murmurs. “A-Yuan.”

Eyes leaking, Mu Qingfang can only hold his lover and whisper, “A-Jiu,” over and over. He doesn’t know how long they stay like that, but it doesn’t feel long enough.

Eventually, Shen Qingqiu pulls back enough to look directly into Mu Qingfang’s eyes. “It’s been over three months.” He tilts his head against Mu Qingfang’s. “You forgave me way too easily when I came out of seclusion.” He sighs deeply. “I missed you.”

Mu Qingfang lifts a hand and runs it through Shen Qingqiu's hair. "A-Jiu. I'm not going anywhere."

A fan thwacks him solidly on the shoulder, and Mu Qingfang yelps. "What was that for?"

Narrowing his eyes, Shen Qingqiu says, "Did you think I didn't notice that a *god* took your body as a vessel?"

"Technically, it was *his* body first." Mu Qingfang says, and then ducks another fan swap.

"*Technically*, A-Yuan should close his mouth." Shen Qingqiu snarks, arching an eyebrow. When Mu Qingfang has silenced himself appropriately, Shen Qingqiu says, "What happened? Why were you…away so long?"

"Huh?" Mu Qingfang is confused at first, then realizees Shen Qingqiu is talking about him sleeping it off. He waves a hand in the air. "First, I was totally drained of qi. Not a drop left in the bucket. Then after Mu Qing descended-it--" Mu Qingfang makes a face. "Things got a little weird."

"I'll say," Shen Qingqoiu mutters, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Anyway, how's Binghe?" Mu Qingfang asks brightly, then watches in amusement at the disgusted expression that crosses Shen Qinhqiu's face.

"That. Boy." Shen Qingqiu sighs. He rubs a hand over his face, then meets Mu Qingfang's eyes. "I'm sure you figured out that he's been sneaking off my peak to train with Liu Qingge?"

Snorting, Mu Qingfang nods. "Yeah, I got that."

"After Liu Shidi recovered, he took Luo Binghe away, ostensibly to train his demon side." Shen Qingqiu purses his lips. "I'm not sure who to feel more sorry for. Binghe, having fixed his affections on such a brute, or Liu Shidi who now has to try and talk about *his* feelings lest he make my disciple *cry*." Shen Qingqiu looks viciously smug. "Somehow the brat has figured out that Liu Qingge is weak to his tears."

Mu Qingfang imagines the unmoveable rock which is Liu Qingge being worn down over days and months from Binghe's river of tears. He snickers. He's not sorry, either! The smartest thing he's ever done with his life was to stay the fuck OUT of that mess. "A-Jiu, tell me the truth," Mu Qingfang says seriously. "How have you been?"

"That…is a complicated answer," Shen Qingqiu says.

"Tell me anyway?" Mu Qingfang asks.

So Shen Qingqiu does. He tells Mu Qingfang about the aftermath of the IAC, how Mu QingFang collapsed not long after Yue Shixiong arrived. Liu Qingge was conscious but unable to walk. Shang Qinghua remained unconscious for the next month.

“And you? How was my A-Jiu?” Mu Qingfang prods gently. He reaches out, and pulls Shen Qingqiu down so he’s half laying on top of Mu Qingfang.

“You-*he* healed the frostbite.” Shen Qingqiu furrows his brow and taps his fingers on Mu Qingfang’s chest. “I was completely drained of qi. Five peak lords, and all but one useless. Yue Qingyuan sent back for help and Xie Shizhi and Wei Shizhi arrived soon after that.”

Sitting up straight, Shen Qingqiu says, “Did you know your disciples carry around qiankun pouch full of things like double stretchers? I think their qiankun pouches had pouches. Fortunately, at least Binghe wasn’t in bad shape, although his demonic energy was quite unstable for a while.” He frowns thoughtfully.

“Anyway, we all got out of the competition area. Several of the lower peak lords pooled their resources and were able to draw a distance shortening array. Yue Shixiong supplied the massive amount of qi to hold it open for so long, and Xie Shizhi ordered all the injured Peak Lords through first.” Shen Qingqiu smiles. “You were back on your own peak before dawn broke.”

“Wow,” Mu Qingfang says, impressed. “That’s incredible.”

Shen Qingqiu snorts. “It’s not like we had a choice. Qing Jing, An Ding, Bai Zhan and Qian Cao all had peak lords injured to the point of near death. The old palace master thought Cang Qiong should stick around to help mop up.” He grins. “Qi-ge set him straight though.” Shen Qingqiu muses, “I wish I’d been around for that.”

Mu Qingfang opens his mouth to say that he’s sorry he wasn’t awake to help. But Shen Qingqiu must read his intentions on his face, and preemptively whacks Mu Qingfang with his fan.

“A-Yuan, I *know* you’re not about to *apologize* for being unconscious when in reality you saved mine, and everyone else's life that was present when the Abyss opened.” Shen Qingqiu says warningly.

Mu Qingfang feels appropriately chastened and so Shen Qingqiu settles back against his body, throwing an arm over his waist. *The one he’s holding his fan with*, Mu Qingfang notes with some amusement. He’ll have to keep himself in line!

After a few minutes of quiet cuddling, Shen Qingqiu continues. “Shang Qinghua woke up from his coma recently, too. Woke up and immediately started crying from the gossip I’ve heard.” He snorts. “Apparently Shang Shidi has discovered he has a backbone. He’s laid down very firm boundaries and refuses to overwork himself any longer.”

“Good for him,” Mu Qingfang says, meaning every word. “Can we back up a second? Zhangmen Shixiong wasn’t upset about Binghe being a part demon?”

“Oh, no. He *was*,” Shen Qingqiu tells him easily. “But it was also clear that a martial god had descended to help with the situation and Qi-ge wasn’t about to make it an issue when it was clear that Mu Qing didn’t have a problem with it.”

Mu Qing, that's one more thing I need to thank you for! Mu Qingfang thinks sincerely. "Is Binghe around?"

Shen Qingqiu exhales heavily. "My disciple is so popular," he mutters. Louder, he says, "You can see him tomorrow. Him and everyone else that's been chomping at the bit to see you."

Genuinely mystified, Mu Qingfang says, "Why would people be-?"

Leaning up on his elbow, Shen Qingqiu looks at him with astonishment. "All of your little strays you've been collecting over the years-*yes*, I know about that- have been hounding me every time I step onto this peak. If I have to tell one more kid to *wait* until you wake up…" His brows furrow. "That's another thing. Why do these children feel so comfortable bothering *me* of all people?"

Mu Qingfang hides a smile. *Probably because he just lights up when he's talking about you, A-Jiu!*. "Who can know?" he says instead.

The next morning-as Shen Qingqiu had predicted, Mu Qingfang is swarmed by visitors.

Luo Binghe arrives just after Shen Qingqiu leaves. Ah, blessed boy, he brought his snow white congee! "Mu Shishu," Luo Binghe greets happily. "You're awake." He brings the bowl over to Mu Qingfang's bed and places it on the overbed table.

Luo Binghe has somehow grown taller and wider while Mu Qingfang's been sleeping. His hair is curlier than ever, and the top part is pulled back and held with a hair stick. A very *nice* hairstick. His demon mark is evident on his forehead but not glowing, and his eyes have taken on a mahogany tone, where once they were pure and deep black. "Binghe, many thanks for helping this old man wake."

Eye sparkling with amusement, Binghe says, "But Mu Shishu *isn't* an old man at *all*." This rotten child pulls a chair over and parks next to the bed.

"That's between you and me," Mu Qingfang says, trying to sound threatening. He takes a spoonful of congee and hums in delight. "Binghe, this is delicious!" Mu Qingfang makes an effort not to scarf down his food but it's difficult. Once he's finished, he lays down his spoon and says, "Now. Tell me what's been happening with you."

Binghe starts by telling him what happened after he collapsed. "Shizun went a little mad, and sent urgent messages to Xie Shijie. Zhangmen Shibo was already there of course. He wasn't too happy to find out that Shizun and Shishu knew about…me being part demon... And-" He hesitates and adds, "Liu Shishu told Yue Shibo that I was still the same dumb kid I've been for the last seven years, and nothing has changed except I have a mark on my face about it." The boy looks like he's trying not to bounce in his seat.

Mu Qingfang inwardly sighs and asks, "So things are…okay with Liu Qingge then?" He wants to die a little bit when Binghe gets a look on his face that can only be described as *voracious*.

Hastily, Luo Binghe wipes the expression from his face and looks like an innocent white lotus. Mu Qingfang mentally lights a candle for Liu Qingge. “Yes, Mu Shishu.” Binghe smiles angelically. “Liu Shishu has been very…supportive.”

I just bet he was, Mu Qingfang thinks.

“We’ve been going out night hunting,” Luo Binghe continues cheerfully. “It’s really helped me get my demon side under control.” He leans forward, “I think before too long, I’ll be able to beat Liu Shishu in a spar.”

“Won’t that be something,” Mu Qingfang says. Binghe leaves shortly after, promising to bring some treats next time.

After that Lai Lihua visits with her son, and Mu Qingfang enjoys playing with the baby. Somehow he’s three years old now! Ah, such a big boy. Mu Qingfang teaches him how to play thumb war and allows the child to beat him mercilessly.

Lai Lihua tells him how she has been working for the peak embroidering arrays into clothing. Actual cultivators have to activate them, but they work better with good needlework! It’s a lovely time, and Mu Qingfang thinks about how he’s missed getting to play with babies.

The next person to show up is Cheng Delun, the young boy he’d rescued after his arm was broken. A little over three years of good food and cultivation later and the boy is tall and lanky, all arms and legs. He’s quick to grin and keeps Mu Qingfang amused with many stories about his good friends Fang Liu and Fang Duyi (Mu Qingfang’s very first strays!)

Fang Lui and his sister have been taking some of the meditation classes offered by Qian Cao peak for the non-cultivators. After diligent practice, the two siblings have been able to open their spirit veins.

They will never be particularly strong cultivators, but should be able to sense qi and use basic talismans which is a huge advantage. These three have been close friends since they all met several years ago, and Cheng Delun kept pushing them to practice, telling them that he didn’t want to grow old and watch them die. Now, he may not have to.

His martial nephews from Zui Xian peak send over some water chestnut cakes and a note wishing Mu Shibo a full recovery! Mu Qingfang gleefully eats a few cakes, then puts the rest aside to share with Shen Qingqiu.

He spends the rest of the day dozing, and the next time he wakes, Shen Qingqiu is sitting in the bedside chair meditating. Mu Qingfang loses several minutes just drinking him in. Eventually, Shen Qingqiu shifts on the chair and says without opening his eyes, “Are you just going to stare at me?” He opens his eyes and gives Mu Qingfang a warm look

Shrugging, Mu Qingfang says simply, “You’re nice to look at.” As he watches a pink flush seeps into Shen Qingqiu’s cheeks. “Sorry for falling asleep on you.”

Shen Qingqiu arches an eyebrow and brandishes his fan, shaking it at Mu Qingfang. “A-Yuan, what’s the rule about apologies?”

Grinning shamelessly, Mu Qingfang says, “No apologies unless A-Jiu wants them.”

“Exactly,” Shen Qingqiu says loftily, sounding exactly like a pompous professor. “Have you talked to your healer about when you might be discharged?”

Mu Qingfang furrows his brow. “Actually no.”

Frowning, Shen Qingqiu says, “Perhaps I should find Wu Shizhi and-”

“Shizun and…Shen Shibo,” Wu Yanshin appears like magic in the doorway. She gives Shen Qingqiu a perfectly even look which he returns in kind. “Shizun, you look much better today. Have you enjoyed your many visitors?”

“I have,” he smiles, “But I’d like some rest, preferably in my own bed.”

Wu Yanshin purses her lips and walks over to the bed. “Wrist?” After a quick scan she says approvingly, “Much improved.”

“Does this mean he can leave?” Shen Qingqiu pounces.

Mu Qingfang hides a smile. He’s somehow getting the impression that Wu Yanshin is ready to wring Shen Qingqiu’s neck. “I promise to be an exemplary patient,” he says.

Snorting, Yanshin says only, “As expected of Shizun.” Then she crosses her arms over her chest. “This disciple has not forgotten what Shizun is like as a patient. However, if Shen Shibo is willing to keep an eye on you, I will discharge you into his care.”

Offended, Mu Qingfang squawks in outrage. “Hey! I’m an adult, you know! A peak lord, even!”

Wu Yanshin sighs deeply. “Shibo?”

Shen Qingqiu nods. “Of course.”

“Wonderful,” Wu Yanshi says. “Truly, a circumstance which pleases everyone. I will return shortly with your medications and instructions.” She bows to both peak lords and retreats, closing the door behind her.

“Is it me or is she really pissed at you?” Mu Qingfang asks Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Qingqiu makes a show of examining his nails. “It’s possible that I irritated her with my demands for updates, and the allowance of sitting by your bedside.”

“Hmm,” Mu Qingfang says, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “We both better get out of here then.”

After a brief discussion of which peak to go to (“*My* peak has Luo Binghe and his cooking you like so much.”) they opt to spend the night on Qing Jing peak. Once Mu Qingfang gets a qiankun pouch with a bunch of medicine as well as several pages of instructions, he climbs up behind Shen Qingqiu on his sword.

The quick flight is more exhausting than Mu Qingfang expects and once they seal themselves in the bamboo house, he just…wilts. Shen Qingqiu catches him when Mu Qingfang starts sagging on his feet, and in a blink, sweeps him up into a princess carry, matter of factly depositing him on the bed.

“Are you all right?” Shen Qingqiu demands, frowning deeply. His fingers twitch slightly like he doesn’t quite know what to do with them

“I’m okay, A-Jiu, just-” Mu Qingfang yawns mightily, turning on his side. “Just *tired*. I’m just gonna…” He closes his eyes and drifts. He’s not quite asleep, so he’s vaguely aware of Shen Qingqiu bustling around and tugging his shoes and socks off, followed by cool fingers on his wrist and a very delicate scan.

The bed shifts next to him and he feels the heat of Shen Qingqiu close by. “A-Jiu,” he murmurs and then slips into actual sleep.

Mu Qingfang briefly wakes in the middle of the night. He’s warm, cozy and feels safe. He breathes in the scent of jasmine and smiles. Strong arms tighten around him, and Shen Qingqiu nuzzles into his hair. “A-Jiu.”

“A-Yuan,” Shen Qingqiu says into the dark.

“I’m so glad to be home,” Mu Qingfang says, voice muffled. His lips are touching Shen Qingqiu’s neck. “I missed you.”

A little huff. “You were asleep.” Shen Qingqiu says.

“Doesn’t matter,” Mu Qingfang says. “I always miss you when you’re not here.”

Shen Qingqiu takes a deep breath and lets it out all at once. His body loses tension and Mu Qingfang snuggles even closer. “Me too,” Shen Qingqiu says. “Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: How is he
WYS: the same
SQQ: How about now?
WYS: "..."
SQQ: ????
WYS: *WHIPS OUT THE NEEDLES*

OMG! You GUYS!! I am calling the main story DONE for now, but I am definitely planning some extras!! I've been dying to write SQQ's POV from chapter 1, and OF COURSE I have to write about the BingLiu adventures!!!

I am so profoundly grateful to every single person who read this story, left kudos or took the time to comment! Thanks for coming on this journey with me :)

As always, please come tell me what you think!

EXTRA: Shen Qingqiu part 1

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: Luo Binghe's canon fucked up disciple era

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Qingqiu wouldn't admit it on pains of death, but he really can't stand his current head disciple. Ming Fan is a boot licking prick, only obedient because Shen Qingqiu has more power than him. Shen Qingqiu may be many things, but an unobservant person is *not* one of them.

He knows very well how Ming Fan treats his shidis. He knows that Ming Fan fancies himself the head of a little gang of the boys around his age. And he also knows that Ming Fan is *never* going to be the next Qing Jing peak lord.

He's a placeholder, that's *it*.

Shen Qingqiu puts thoughts of his head disciple out of his mind and concentrates on his meditation. His cultivation has been stagnant for the past year, and it is *unacceptable*. Bad enough he started late, and will always have an unstable foundation. And that's without even mentioning the chronic pain he's almost always in.

People like Liu Qingge have it so easy, he thinks. Try being a slave your entire life and then forced to practice demonic cultivation so your *Shifu* doesn't murder you in your sleep, he wants to say to Liu Shidi some days.

Gods above, Shen Qingqiu *hates* that man. Self righteous *prick* that he is.

Anyway, he's meditating in the bamboo house trying to push past a bottleneck. He's so close! He can feel it!

A knock at the door disturbs his peace, and Shen Qingqiu irritably calls, "Enter." This had better not be Yue Qingyuan he thinks.

Ming Fan enters and calls out, "Shizun, I brought the papers from the morning calligraphy class. Do you want me to mark them?"

Shen Qingqiu opens his eyes and exhales heavily. Ming Fan lingers in the doorway of his office. His face is expectant, but really is just a mask of duty. Shen Qingqiu knows that this young man doesn't particularly care for him one way or another. And that's fine.

“Shizun, you should have seen the little beast! Ha! He came late to class, and so I gave him chores to do. That will teach him.”

Under the desk where Ming Fan can’t see him, he clenches his fist. *Luo Binghe*, one of his more pathetic students. Always bowing and scraping, searching for scraps of affection. Yet he can’t be bothered to even *read* his cultivation manual, apparently. Still, Shen Qingqiu would like to know how Luo Binghe is supposed to improve when Ming Fan is making it impossible for him to do so.

Sooner or later, all of my chickens come home to roost, Shen Qingqiu thinks morosely. “Just leave them on my desk,” he says finally. “I’ll take care of it.” He pins Ming Fan with his gaze. “You should work on your cultivation.”

Ming Fan bows. “Yes Shizun.” He turns and leaves.

Shen Qingqiu returns to his meditation, but annoyance with his two troublesome disciples makes it impossible. He is just too irritable. It’s been getting worse lately. Every peak lord meeting he ends up in a screaming match with Liu Qingge while Yue Qingyuan is useless as always.

Of course, Yue Qingyuan is his own problem. Always sending over useless trinkets, or inviting him for *tea*. Nothing but pretense, Shen Qingqiu thinks. More than anything, he *hates* two faced people.

As if his thoughts have summoned news from the sect leader, a qi messenger flies through the wall and lands on the desk. “Would Shen Shidi like to join me for dinner tonight at my peak?”

Yue Qingyuan’s voice sounds young in the message, and Shen Qingqiu is assaulted with a sense memory of Qi-ge long before he came to Cang Qiong mountain sect, back when he was the only thing standing between Shen Jiu and the rest of the world. Back when he was *family*

Now, he’s just *alone*.

Shen Qingqiu’s qi roils and surges, and he realizes with a little horror that he’s actually been on the edge of a qi deviation for days now. Fuck, he thinks, and swallows down blood. He pulls out an emergency talisman that will call Mu Shidi.

Should he even use this? What’s the point? Mu Shidi certainly doesn’t care if Shen Qingqiu were to live or die!

He chokes on blood, and manages to cough some up. His meridians warp and twist painfully. Okay, that settles it, Shen Qingqiu decides. He barely has enough usable qi to light the thing.

Bedroom, he thinks. If he dies, he doesn’t want to do it sitting up at his *desk*. Shen Qingqiu tries to stand and the world tilts alarmingly. He crashes to the ground, hands taking the brunt of the impact, sending a shockwave of pain up his forearms.

Reduced to crawling, Shen Qingqiu thinks contemptuously at himself. *Waiting for a saviour once again*. Slowly, he drags himself across the house to his bedroom. Only by sheer force of will does he make it into his bed.

He closes his eyes and drifts.

Ming Fan's voice, rising in panic. Then another voice, low and calm. Ah, Shen Qingqiu realizes. Mu Shidi must have arrived. He feels the presence of the other man in the doorway observing him.

"Shen Shixiong," Mu Shidi says. "It's Mu Shidi. Your disciple called me to check on you and I am going to run a scan and will need to touch you to do so."

If Shen Qingqiu could open his eyes, he'd stare at the healer. Since when does he give these flowery speeches? Usually it's right to the point, just grab his wrist and scan. He listens with some amusement as Mu Shidi assigns Ming Fan some obvious busy work to get rid of him.

Then Mu Qingfang perches on the edge of Shen Qingqiu's bed. Cool fingertips press delicately against his pulse and Mu Qingfang sends the barest whisper of qi through his system. Instead of the sensation of nails being driven into him, this feels like a cool mist on the hottest day of summer.

He doesn't know what Mu Shidi is *doing* exactly, but it's definitely helping with the pain. Somehow, Mu Shidi manages to gently work a tiny hole through the largest of his blockages. Shen Qingqiu knows his body. This is the one he's had the longest. The one that acts up whenever he makes the mistake of thinking about ~~Qi-ge~~ Yue Qingyuan.

In addition, where his meridians are the weakest Mu Qingfang does something which makes them feel less like collapsing.

"There you go, Shixiong," Mu Qingfang says soothingly, "It's looking much better now. I think you'll make a good recovery." He wraps his warm hand over Shen Qingqiu's and squeezes.

Pain flares, both from the old injuries and new ones he'd sustained in the fall to the floor.

"Shixiong, would you consider waking up for Shidi?" Mu Qingfang asks gently. Shen Qingqiu feels pretty sure he would remember if Mu Qingfang was *always* this comforting to be around.

He opens his eyes and observes Mu Shidi. The healer looks very different than he usually does. He's not wearing that stupid hat, and he's shaved off that abomination of a mustache.

"Hello Shixiong," Mu Qingfang smiles, and Shen Qingqiu is startled. *Since when does Mu Shidi look like that?!* "It's good to see you awake," Mu Shidi continues. "How are you feeling?"

Shen Qingqiu blinks. Mu Shidi sounds like he *actually* wants to know. Rubbing his head a little, Shen Qingqiu says wryly, "Like I just had a qi deviation."

Nodding a little, Mu Qingfang says, “Yes, I would think so. It was a significant one, too.” He meets Shen Qingqiu’s eyes directly.

“Why-” Shen Qingqiu clamps his mouth shut.

Mu Qingfang leans forward. “Yes? What do you need?”

Shen Qingqiu shifts, so that he’s sitting up against the headboard. “Did you do something different this time?”

Looking surprised, Mu Qingfang says, “No. I don’t think so.” After a moment he adds, “Do you feel differently?”

Pursing his lips, Shen Qingqiu chooses his words carefully. “I usually feel much worse than this.”

Mu Qingfang looks pleased at that comment and his face brightens. His eyes are a pale shade of gray-green, Shen Qingqiu realizes. He’s never noticed before. Mu Qingfang says, “I shall take that as a compliment.” A few seconds later he says, “Do you have a headache? Any pain elsewhere?”

Why is Mu Shidi being so *nosy* today? Shen Qingqiu wonders. What is it about *today* of all days that he wants to pretend to care. Eventually he answers the question. “Yes, to the headache.”

Mercifully, Mu Qingfang starts digging through his qiankun pouch. “What about other pain?” he asks, while still rummaging. Shen Qingqiu doesn’t answer and Mu Qingfang glances over at him. “Shixiong?”

Shen Qingqiu meets Mu Shidi’s eyes for a long moment. He crosses his arms over his chest and looks away. “Just the usual,” he says shortly. There, he thinks. That’s the end of that.

But Mu Qingfang peers at Shen Qingqiu like he’s trying to see inside his head. “Would Shixiong please tell me more?”

More? More *what*, Shidi? What does that mean?

Fortunately, Mu Shidi goes on to clarify, “What is the usual amount of pain? Where do you usually have it, how long have you had it, and what kind of pain is it?”

Surely, he can’t really want *all* of that information can he? Shen Qingqiu frowns deeply. What is this shidi of his getting at? What does he really *want*.

Mu Qingfang says, “ I am asking because I would like to treat any lingering pain you have whether it’s new or not.” He bites his lip and then adds, “Shen Shixiong should not feel pressured to answer anything he does not wish to.” He meets Shen Qingqiu’s eyes. “I merely wanted him to know that this Shidi is always available if Shixiong has need of him.”

Shen Qinqiu blinks. If…? He can’t make sense of this! Since when does *anyone* act like they give a damn about him? Shen Qingqiu literally can not remember the last time someone

asked after him sincerely and not just because they were making small talk.

Perhaps the jiejie's at the brothel. But then again, isn't he paying them to take an interest? To pretend like they care?

While Shen Qingqiu's thoughts race, Mu Qingfang sits perfectly still, giving Shen Qingqiu his undivided attention. When the healer shows no signs of irritation or impatience, Shen Qingqiu says finally, "My hands hurt."

Mu Shidi swallows. He looks horrified. "Did I hurt you before when I squeezed your hand?"

Now, Shen Qingqiu is not inclined to *lie*, but for a moment he almost wants to. Instead he looks away. "Mn."

Instead of brushing all this off, Mu Qingfang says, "Shixiong. The gesture was meant to comfort you. I am sorry this Shidi caused you pain inadvertently instead. Please, may I run a scan?"

Undivided attention and now, a sincere apology? Shen Qingqiu doesn't bother to look through past memories. He already knows that's never happened before. So he carefully holds out his hand, and deliberately does not meet Mu Shidi's eyes. It seems Mu Shidi is a great deal more observant than he has always believed.

Interestingly, Mu Qingfang does not touch him directly this time. He cups his hands *around* Shen Qingqiu's hand. In moments, Mu Qingfang's brow furrows and he says, "I see…This must make it difficult to-"

Shen Qingqiu yanks his hand back. "To do my job? Yes." He doesn't need a doctor to tell him about how the crushed bones of his hand and fingers never healed right. How could they when he spent his entire childhood mostly starved to death. One of the other Qian Cao healers had worked with him for a while before everything went sour, but…

"Anti-inflammatory tea," Mu Qingfang announces. "As well, I will send over a container of beeswax and a number of specialized warming talismans. Once the beeswax assumes a liquid form, you can dip your hand-you know what? Why don't I just bring it over in a couple of days and show you how to use the wax treatment."

"You can treat this?" Shen Qingqiu asks suspiciously.

"Yes, certainly," Mu Qingfang says. "The melted beeswax with mitigate the pain on the worst days. It…it provides for some deeper feeling relief for a lot of patients. The tea is based on willow bark and-" Mu Qingfang smiles. *SMILES* at Shen Qingqiu! "You will definitely want to add some honey to make it more palatable." He looks directly into Shen Qingqiu's eyes. "But Shixiong, *yes*, this pain can be treated and hopefully will improve your quality of life."

Feeling quite dubious, Shen Qingqiu says, "Very well." He supposes he will have to see. At any rate, it's more than he expected. Wax treatments. How bizarre.

“What else,” Mu Shidi asks, and Shen Qinqgiu has to replay the conversation to make sure he hasn’t missed any salient points. “What other pain do you have?” He gives Shen Qingqiu an expectant look.

Let’s see Shidi. There’s the constant gnawing in my stomach, my feet are always cold, I can’t sleep, and I hate everything about my life. But Mu Qingfang doesn’t want to know all that. No one does. “Another time perhaps,” Shen Qingqiu says distantly, thinking, how about never?

“Can I do anything for you before I take my leave?” Mu Qingfang asks solicitously.

Exhaling heavily, Shen Qingqiu snaps, “Why are you being like this today?” He definitely doesn’t mean to say it, and certainly not in such a sharp tone of voice.

Sputtering, Mu Shidi manages to says, “Why am I-? This is just how I *am*?” He looks mystified.

“Fine,” Shen Qingqiu says, waving a hand in the air like it doesn’t matter that Mu Qingfang has shown more care to him today than he has in the past *decade*. The doctor turns to leave, but before he can, Shen Qingqiu adds, “It suits you.” He gestures to his upper lip.

Mu Qingfang *laughs*. “The mustache? It seemed like it was time for a change.” He meets Shen Qingqiu’s eyes. “Feel better Shixiong,” he says, and then leaves.

Shen Qingqiu actually *does* feel much better, he thinks to himself once Mu Shidi is gone. The burning in his meridians has resolved and the flow of his qi has improved. He closes his eyes and empties his mind.

A short time later a qi message comes in, grabbing his attention. Mu Shidi’s voice says. ““Shen Shixiong, I found one of your disciples injured in the forest and am taking him to Qian Cao for treatment. I will have one of my disciples return him afterwards.”

Sighing heavily, Shen Qingqiu doesn’t need to be told which one of his idiot disciples it is. It must be Luo Binghe, of course. After Mu Shidi kicked Ming Fan out, he probably went with his little gang to bother Luo Binghe.

This new and improved version of Mu Shidi would not stand idly by if he happened to witness the bullying.

The next morning someone knocks on Shen Qingqiu’s door. It’s a firm knock, nearly a challenge. Not someone he’s familiar with. When he answers it, he finds a Qian Cao disciple on his doorstep. “What is it?”

“Shen Shibo,” she says, bowing. “I am Wu Yanshin, the head disciple for Qian Cao peak. Shizun tasked me with returning your disciple, Luo Binghe to Qing Jing this morning.” She looks at him expectantly and so with reluctance, Shen Qingqiu allows her to enter his home.

Once the door is closed, Wu Yanshin says, “Luo Binghe was found to be cultivating with a fake manual.” She produces it from her sleeves and hands it over.

To his surprise, he actually recognizes the thing. He clenches his jaw for a moment. Oh, yes. He’s *quite* familiar with this piece of trash, since his shixiongs had given it to *him*. Attempting to cultivate with it had left Shen Qingqiu with lasting damage to his meridians.

Continuing, Wu Yanshin meets his eyes. “Shizun was able to repair the damage to Luo Binghe’s meridians since this was caught early enough.” Her expression turns fiercer. “Disciple Luo had a number of injuries, both old and new, which were also treated by our peak. What’s more, he is suffering from malnutrition-”

“What?” Shen Qingqiuy interrupts. “How can *that* be? There’s a communal dining hall-” His voice cuts off abruptly and his expression darkens.

Nodding, Wu Yanshin says, “Shizun said that Disciple Luo was in the process of getting beaten up by four older boys when he came across them.” After a moment she adds viciously, “One of them was Shen Shibo’s head disciple.”

“I see,” Shen Qingqiu says, coldly furious. *That little fucker*, he thinks. This pushy disciple eyes him expectantly. “I will take care of it,” he says finally, annoyed. He doesn’t need this little witch telling him what to do!

However, Wu Yanshin just looks troubled, not smug, as he might have expected. “Shizun also asked me to relay to you that he will visit tomorrow and bring the supplies he discussed with you if that is acceptable.”

“Fine.” Shen Qingqiu says. “If that is all?” *Get out,* he strongly implies.

“Wishing Shen Shibo a good day,” Wu Yanshin says sweetly and then leaves.

For several minutes Shen Qingqiu paces angrily around his house. Bullying is one thing. Preventing someone from *eating* is on a whole other level. Not to mention the lifetime consequences if Luo Binghe had kept using that fake manual. He calls Ming Fan to the bamboo house immediately.

A short time later, Ming Fan shows up. “Disciple greets Shizun,” he says, bowing.

“Kneel.” Shen Qingqiu says coldly, and Ming Fan looks startled by his harsh tone. Hastily, the boy kneels. “Why do you think I called you here?”

Ming Fan swallows. “This disciple couldn’t say.”

Shen Qingqiu stares down at him in silence. *All of my chickens come home to roost. All of them*. “Qian Cao delivered Luo Binghe back to this peak a short time ago.”

Ming Fan says nothing, and stares at the floor.

Drawing the fake manual out of his sleeves, Shen Qingqiu uses it to swat Ming Fan over the head. “Exactly *where* did Luo Binghe get this?” He throws it to the floor.

Dropping into a kowtow, Ming Fan says, “Begging Shizun for forgiveness.”

Shen Qingqiu shakes his head. “And what are you asking forgiveness for? *Specifically*.”

Stammering out a list of crimes, Shen Qingqiu notes that he’s left several out. “Have you prevented Luo Binghe from *eating*?” Ming Fan says nothing, and Shen Qingqiu loses it. “ANSWER ME!”

“...yes, shizun,” Ming Fan says, finally appearing to understand the depths of Shen Qingqiu’s *rage*. “Ning Shimei was giving him food though-”

If Shen Qingqiu has *another* qi deviation from this little prick’s sheer stupidity, he really may kill him. “Get up,” he says, infuriated beyond belief. “You are stripped of the head disciple position. You will kneel at the Reflection Hall for two days. During that time, you will *not* eat, so that you might experience the joys of starvation and hunger. Be grateful I do not throw you off this mountain. Now, get out of my sight.”

Finally, Ming Fan appears shaken. He bows and then leaves.

Once the boy is gone, Shen Qingqiu makes himself tea. His hands are shaking, and he stops before he drops his teapot. Leaning heavily on the counter, he breathes. Shen Qingqiu always knew that he was a terrible person, but he didn’t think he was *this* bad, to inspire a disciple to knowingly harm another?

The meridians in his chest pulse warningly, and Shen Qingqiu forcefully thinks about other things. Imagine having to call Mu Shidi back if he deviates again, just a day later. The humiliation!

Although Mu Qingfang was so comforting yesterday, maybe he should deviate again. *Ridiculous*, Shen Qingqiu thinks, but feels slightly more stable.

Once he’s regained some equilibrium, Shen Qingqiu goes in search of his youngest disciple. He finds Luo Binghe kneeling at the creek, trying to do laundry.

“Luo Binghe,” Shen Qingqiu says, and this ridiculous boy nearly falls head first into the water. He sighs and waits for the kid to right himself and then bow.

Luo Binghe, now that he’s looking closely, is terribly thin. Shen Qingqiu presses his lips together. Where to even start with this mess? “Follow me,” he says, and turns to head back to the bamboo house. He’s not getting through this conversation without tea.

After they enter, Shen Qingqiu asks, “Does Disciple Luo know how to make tea?” He watches his disciple closely.

Face paling, Luo Binghe shakes his head. “No, Shizun, this disciple is stupid.”

“Observe, then,” Shen Qingqiu says, and demonstrates. Usually, the *head disciple* is responsible for basic instruction such as teaching the new disciples to make tea, but clearly, he has to assume that Ming Fan didn’t do anything he was supposed to. Shen Qingqiu explains the process of heating the water, and rinsing the tea leaves with it. He explains the

steeping process and that different tea leaves require different steeping times to avoid bitterness. Finally, he carries the tea service to the table and pours for them both.

Luo Binghe, contrary to what he said about being stupid, pays close attention and doesn't ask any questions. He waits for Shen Qingqiu to sip his tea before taking a sip himself.

He watches him warily, and Shen Qingqiu reminds himself that the kid is probably hungry, as well. He sighs heavily and gets up, returning with a couple of pork buns he's kept in stasis. He plates one and lays it in front of Luo Binghe. "Eat."

Luo Binghe scarfs the bun down in about three bites. Shen Qingqiu blinks, and dumps his own bun onto his plate. "Shizun?"

Rubbing his forehead, Shen Qingqiuy says tiredly, "Eat." Why is this boy so exhausting? He gets up and goes into his office, pulling a cultivation manual off the shelf. He tosses it on the table in front of Luo Binghe. "Ming Fan gave you a fake cultivation manual. Use this one instead."

Frowning, Luo Binghe looks first at the manual and then over at Shen Qingqiu. "But why would…?"

"Because he's an idiot who can't think through the consequences of his own actions," Shen Qingqiu says. "From now on, Luo Binghe will attend every class he is supposed to, no matter if his shixiongs try to give him *chores*. If Luo Binghe has difficulty coming to class he is to report to this master and *tell him immediately.* Understood?"

"Yes, Shizun!" Luo Binghe says, eyes brightening. "Does this mean I should try and sleep in the dormitories again?"

Oh, what the fuck. *Really?* "Yes," Shen Qingqiu tells him firmly. "Where has my disciple been sleeping if not in the dorms?" He has a bad feeling about this-

"In the woodshed," Luo Binghe says.

All of my chickens, Shen Qingqiu thinks. Apparently, he has a lot of work to do.

Chapter End Notes

You may notice that Shen Qingqiu is especially harsh here at the very beginning. His heart meridians are all blocked up, really limiting his insight and ability to experience empathy. At this point the only thing he feels on a regular basis is anger, and distrust.

SQQ: I hate everything, and everyone, especially *me*
MQF: sweeps in, treats SQQ like a person, is caring and compassionate

SQQ: With ONE (1) exception

Wu Yanshin: Shen Shibo's going to FIX this, RIGHT?!
SQQ: YES, you harridan, now get OUT

Come tell me what you think!! :)

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Wax treatments and 7/9 reconciliation!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Midmorning of the following day, Shen Qingqiu gets an urgent message from the sect leader requesting a meeting. Rolling his eyes, Shen Qingqiu dissipates the qi message without answering it. He has no desire to deal with Yue Qingyuan today. He's already checked in on Ming Fan, who is still kneeling as part of his punishment. Shen Qingqiu allows him to go get some water but warns him sharply to eat *nothing*.

Shen Qingqiu waits while the boy runs to the nearest pavilion and then returns. Ming Fan's stomach is growling obnoxiously, so he feels safe in assuming he followed instructions. *For once*.

He's in the middle of music lessons (if these children don't improve soon he's going to gouge out his eardrums) when one of his alert talismans goes off, signaling that someone was at his house. Cutting the lesson short, Shen Qingqiu leaves the children to pack up their instruments and goes to investigate.

Mu Shidi is wandering around looking lost, so Shen Qingqiu approaches from the back and says, "Mu Shidi."

The other peak lord jumps, and Shen Qingqiu suppresses a smile.

"Hello Shen Shixiong," Mu Shidi says. "I was hoping to catch you and go over the procedure we discussed yesterday."

Shen Qingqiu thinks that Mu Shidi is awfully eager to help him out. He still doesn't know what his motive can possibly be. "Very well," he says, and starts walking toward the bamboo house. Mu Shidi follows without a word. How…obedient. Once they're inside, Shen Qinqiu doesn't bother offering any refreshments. It's not like this is a social visit, he thinks. He indicates that Mu Qingfang should take a seat at the table.

Mu Qingfang pulls all manner of things from his qiankun pouch. Oh, Shen Qingqiu thinks. That bowl is actually lovely. Mu Qingfang puts large hunks of beeswax directly into the large wooden bowl and explains about the talismans. "Shall I walk you through a treatment?"

Shen Qingqiu presses his lips together, but nods. What follows is one of the most…peculiar events in his entire life.

Basically, once the wax melts, Mu Qingfang takes Shen Qingqiu's hand gently, like he's made from spun sugar and guides his hand into the warm wax, while crooning praise the entire time. It's oddly…sensual, and Mu Qingfang keeps…saying things…that make Shen Qingqiu *feel* things. And then! Has the nerve to ask, "Is it too warm?"

Feeling strangled, Shen Qingqiu says, "It's…it's fine."

Appearing pleased, Mu Qingfang says, "You're doing very well. Let's go again."

Heat sweeps over Shen Qingqiu. Is he…being *seduced*? Once his hand is covered in warm wax, Mu Qingfang allows it to harden before wrapping his hand and wrist in a heated towel.

"Now what?" Shen Qingqiu asks, with some trepidation. If this *is* a seduction attempt…he might… allow it to happen. Rumors were quite clear around the twelve peaks that a night spent with Mu Qingfang was life changing.

Mu Qingfang meets his eyes. "Now you *relax*," he says.

Excuse you, what? Relax? Shen Qingqiu thinks. Have you even *met me*? A shadow crosses Mu Qingfang's face and for a moment the other peak lord looks terribly sad.

After a few minutes of extremely awkward conversation, Mu Qingfang offers to do his other hand. After a moment of consideration (it will mean he can't use either hand for a while but the prospect of less pain is tempting), he agrees. "You might as well," Shen Qingqiu says eventually.

Mu Shidi guides Shen Qingqiu's left hand into the warm wax, murmuring,

"There you go. Very good, Shixiong, now pull it back out. Yes, nice and slow, lovely."

Shen Qingqiu is left wondering if he's somehow stepped into a yellow book. If Mu Shidi is intent on seducing him…it's working! He hasn't had this much praise, since…well. Ever.

"All right, let's dip you back in. I hope this makes your hand feel better. Pain in your knuckles is the worst. Yes, like that, you're doing well.." Mu Qingfang produces another hot towel and wraps this hand up as well.

His chest feels like it's filled with red hot embers and his head feels a little fuzzy. Did Mu Shidi drug him somehow? Shen Qingqiu feels very weird. Mu Qingfang gets a worried look on his face and then says, "Shixiong, may I touch your face with my hand? I'd like to check your temperature."

Looking away in embarrassment, Shen Qingqu says only, "Mn." Mu Shidi reaches out and lays the back of his hand against his forehead like one might do to a small child. "Well thankfully your skin feels fine. Perhaps a heat reaction from the wax," he muses. "I think, unless you had help, you should probably do one hand at a time." He meets Shen Qingqiu's eyes. "Is it helping at all?

Shen Qingqiu has to wipe his expression blank. "I…" he swallows. "It's helping." This is the most personal care he's ever received in his life, Shidi! Of course it's helping!

After perhaps ten minutes, Mu Shidi removes the towel from his right hand and then carefully peels the wax away from his skin.

Shen Qingqiu's hand is pink when the treatment is finished and he has absolutely *no* pain. Experimentally he flexes his hand into a fist, and then spreads his fingers wide. It's only now that Mu Shidi is getting ready to leave that Shen Qingqiu regrets not offering him any tea when he arrived. He could have used that as an excuse to prolong the visit.

Wait. What? Clearly Mu Qingfang has put some kind of *spell* on him. Shen Qingqiu doesn't *like* people. This is--well, it's an aberration! That's *all*.

It *has* to be.

Mu Qingfang takes his leave after bestowing Shen Qingqiu with a sweet smile. Shen Qingqiu grips the doorframe for a long moment after the other peak lord descends the steps.

His hands don't hurt at *all*.

Shortly thereafter, Shen Qingqiu dodges another qi message from the sect leader, this time Yue Qingyuan sounding more insistent. Too bad! It's been a remarkably pleasant day, and Shen Qingqiu would like to not ruin it, thank you very much.

After the hour for dinner has come and gone, Shen Qingqiu decides to go for a walk. He wanders past the back side of the bamboo house and walks until he gets to the cliffs. He meditates for the next hour and then returns to his home, feeling at peace.

It lasts until he sees the person waiting for him on his porch. Shen Qingqiu narrows his eyes and stomps forward. "What do you want?"

Yue Qingyuan stands up hastily. His eyes are red and his face is blotchy. "Shen Shidi," he croaks.

"What's wrong with you?" Shen Qingqiu shoves aside his anger for an emotion he's not calling concern. Anything to discomfit the sect leader surely has…safety implications, right? "Come in, then."

Once he shuts the door, he turns around to find Yue Qingyuan on his knees with his head on the ground.

"Get *up*! What is *wrong* with you?!" Shen Qingqiu exclaims.

Yue Qingyuan does *not* get up, but he *does* start talking. He talks without stopping or letting Shen Qingqiu get a word in edgewise. He tells Shen Qingqiu a story of a boy filled with hubris, a boy who thought he could tame the fiercest sword in Wan Jian's Sword Hall. He tells Shen Qingqiu how it nearly consumed his *soul*.

He tells Shen Qingqiu how his masters trapped him in the Ling Xi caves to rebuild his cultivation, using techniques cobbled together from all twelve peaks. He tells Shen Qingqiu of madness, of the pain from constant qi deviations.

And above all, his desire to return to the Qiu mansion and rescue Shen Qingqiu.

“I didn’t realize you thought that I *forgot* about you, that you thought I couldn’t *care* about you.” Yue Qingyuan is weeping into Shen Qingqiu’s floorboards. “I never forgot you, not for a day, not for a minute, not for a single second. Xiao Jiu, I missed you so *much*, I tried so hard to come back but in the end I failed you.

“A worse failure than I even thought, because after all this time, Xiao Jiu thought that he was not loved, or missed or wanted. This Qi-ge has always been empty without his Xiao Jiu.”

Shen Qingqiu’s lips parted in surprise several minutes ago, and now, a raging heat races through his chest, burning away a *huge* chunk of the block in his meridians. All at once, the flow of his qi improves and it feels like the block of ice that has always encased him, held him separate, held him *apart*, just…melts.

Qi-ge is still on his knees with his head on the floor. Shen Qingqiu sinks to his knees silently. Hesitantly he reaches out and lays a hand on Yue Qingyuan’s back. The muscles tense under his hand, and Shen Qingqiu withdraws his arm like he’s been burned.

But Yue Qingyuan just starts crying *harder*, his shoulders are shaking, and it’s making Shen Qingqiu’s throat hurt and his eyes sting. He reaches out again, and this time when he lays his palm on Qi-ge’s back, he doesn’t move it away.

Instead Shen Qingqiu inches closer, feeling much more like ‘Xiao Jiu’ than he has in years. “Qi-ge,” he says somehow, and finally Yue Qingyuan straightens up into a kneel.

Qi-ge’s face *crumples* and he says through his tears, “Xiao Jiu. Please forgive me. I missed you so *much*.” He reaches out a shaking arm and wipes something from Shen Qingqiu’s face.

Shen Qingqiu’s body acts instinctively, and he throws himself forward, like he’s throwing himself over a cliff, and for *once*, he’s not afraid.

This time, Qi-ge is there to catch him.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: Is this a...seduction?
MQF: That's right, in and out *slowly*. SQQ is doing so WELL.
SQQ: *fans self* It's working

YQY: Pls meet with me, SQQ
SQQ: HAHAHA NO
YQY: how about now?
SQQ: NOPE

YQY: Shows up and looks like SHIT
SQQ: ....fine.

It literally just occurred to me that I don't have to make these extras 3-4K each. That like. I could just write whatever strikes me! Wild if true!

Come tell me what you think! :)

SQQ Extra part 3

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: None!

A few minutes later someone knocks at the door.

Opening it, he finds Luo Binghe standing on his doorstep, bright eyed and eager. Shen Qingqiu sighs. “This disciple greets Shizun!” the boy says enthusiastically.

Gods have mercy. “Little beast,” Shen Qingqiu says, “Go to the dining hall and bring back two plates of food. Quickly.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Qingqiu falls asleep on Qi-ge’s shoulder while they’re leaning against the wall. He wakes up stiff the next morning, but circulating his qi takes care of that nicely. He hasn’t slept this well in…he can’t actually remember.

He knocks Yue Qingyuan’s shoulder. “Qi-ge, it’s morning, wake up.”

Blinking slowly, Yue Qingyuan meets his eyes and then smiles. “Is this a dream?”

Shen Qingqiu huffs. “If you think I’d willingly *dream* about sleeping on the *floor* you’ve gone mad. Get up, make yourself presentable. I’ll make tea and send for food.”

Qi-ge disappears into the back of the house where the bath room is and Shen Qingqiu finds his mind drifting while he prepares tea. Experimentally, he flexes his hands into fists. No pain. He circulates his qi, and it flows smoothly. No stuttering, or near blockages. Shen Qingqiu takes a deep breath.

He feels so much lighter.

Shen Qingqiu lights a talisman to call a disciple. Now that Ming Fan has been removed as head disciple, he’s not actually sure who will answer. Well. This ought to be entertaining at least.

A few minutes later someone knocks at the door.

Opening it, he finds Luo Binghe standing on his doorstep, bright eyed and eager. Shen Qingqiu sighs. “This disciple greets Shizun!” the boy says enthusiastically.

Gods have mercy. “Little beast,” Shen Qingqiu says, “Go to the dining hall and bring back two plates of food. Quickly.”

A hasty bow followed by, “Of course, Shizun!” And Luo Binghe turns on the spot and runs off!

What. The fuck.

Shen Qingqiu shakes his head, closes the door and brings the tea service over to the table. By the time he gets there, Qi-ge emerges, hair perfectly done and contained in his Sect Leader crown. He’s still a little puffy under the eyes and Shen Qingqiu tsks judgmentally. “Breakfast will be here shortly,” he says. “Sit.”

He pours tea for them both, and Yue Qingyuan acts like this is the best thing that has ever happened to him. Pathetic. “So. What made you track me down so insistently,” Shen Qingqiu inquires, tapping a finger on his cup. “I’ve been here for many years. Why now?”

Smiling sheepishly, Yue Qingyuan looks down for a moment before meeting Shen Qingqiu’s eyes. “Ah. Actually, Mu Shidi had some choice words for me about …how I was treating you.”

That garners one hundred percent of his attention. “Did he?” Shen Qingqiu asks. “Interesting.” He leans forward. “Mu Shidi has been very…assertive lately, hasn’t he?”

Yue Qingyuan laughs. Not the fake chuckle he normally uses, but the one Shen Qingqiu remembers from his childhood. Throwing his head back and loudly laughing. “Oh, yes.” Qi-ge sobers. “He told me that I should explain to you in detail what prevented me from coming back for you and that if I wasn’t willing to do that, I shouldn’t bother you ever again.” He grins. “And *then*, he told me to shit or get off the pot!” Yue Qingyuan cackles, eyes forming crescents.

Unable to help himself, Shen Qingqiu laughs too. His smile lingers as he tries to picture it. Mu Qingfang, usually so unflappable, now has enough temper to scold the sect leader!

“He looked quite tired,” Yue Qingyuan adds, after taking a drink. “I had called him to Qiong Ding late and I suspect he’d just returned to the peaks.”

Frowning, Shen Qingqiu says, “Returned from where?”

Waving a hand in the air, Yue Qingyuan says, “Qian Cao peak hosts a number of free clinics weekly, treating the mortals that live in the valley below. From what I recall, Mu Shidi didn’t used to be so personally involved. It was more a learning opportunity for the senior disciples. I think he started joining them four or five months ago.”

Shen Qingqiu hums. That’s…odd.

“You should know that I asked how you were and Mu Shidi refused to tell me anything about your condition.”

Frowning, Shen Qingqiu says, “Why was that?”

Yue Qingyuan gives him a half shrug. “He wasn’t going to discuss your private medical information.”

Shen Qingqiu’s eyebrows approach his hairline. Interesting.

Just then he hears clattering footsteps on the porch and then the sound of scuffling. Shen Qingqiu rolls his eyes, and gets up to open the door before Luo Binghe dumps their food all over the ground. The little beast looks surprised but offers a wide grin. “Hello, Shizun! This disciple has your breakfast ready!” He’s holding a covered platter.

It smells heavenly, Shen Qingqiu must admit. He takes the platter from Luo Binghe and sets it on the table. Lifting the cover, he stares down at two bowls of snow white congee, topped with ginger and green onions and slices of some kind of savory meat. There’s also a few baozi, still steaming.

“Did Shen Shidi get a new cook?” Yue Qingyuan asks.

Luo Binghe hastily bows. “Greetings Zhangmen Shibo! Answering Shibo, this disciple cooked!”

Arching an eyebrow, Shen Qingqiu drawls, “And where did my disciple learn to cook?”

Luo Binghe wilts slightly, then rallies. “This disciple’s mother taught him,” he says quietly.

Fine.

“Dismissed,” Shen Qingqiu says. Before Luo Binghe gets to the door, Shen Qingqiu adds, “Have you been eating properly?”

Luo Binghe gives him a delighted grin. (*Why*?) “Yes, Shizun!”

Exhaling heavily, Shen Qingqiu orders, “Out!” and the boy scampers off, accidentally slamming the door behind him.

After about a week of thinking things over, Shen Qingqiu decides to pay Mu Qingfang a visit, meaning to invite him for tea. The rumors that Xiao Qingshen had blamed the doctor for the death of his head disciple had nothing at all to do with it.

He flies over to Qian Cao sometime after midmorning, only to be told by Mu Shidi’s head disciple, “Shizun got called away urgently but we expect him back soon.” The woman looks at him like someone might look at a Blood Spitting Tiger. Warily. She does allow him to wait in Mu Shidi’s office, however.

Shen Qingqiu occupies himself with a light meditation while he waits. He can’t help marveling at how easily his qi flows. Eventually he hears footsteps, and Mu Shidi says, “Shixiong,” in surprise.

Twisting in his chair, Shen Qingqiu arches an eyebrow. “Mu Shidi. You’ve been busy.” Mu Qingfang looks tired, dark circles under his eyes and a pale cast to his face. Doesn’t he know that he can circulate his qi and take care of those under eye bags?

Mu Qingfang takes a seat behind his desk. “I’d offer tea, but I’m afraid I’m waiting on a replacement tea service,” he says apologetically. He frowns at his desk then meets Shen Qingqiu's eyes. “What can I do for you, Shixiong?”

Shen Qingqiu would like a little more information on his chat with Qi-ge, thank you! “I heard you paid a visit to the sect leader recently.

Rubbing his forehead, Mu Qingfang says with exasperation, “I’m not discussing anyone’s medical records.”

“So I’ve heard,” Shen Qingqiu agrees acerbically. “Yue Shixiong said you told him the same thing.” After a moment he adds, “I suppose I have *you* to blame for sending Yue Shixiong all over the mountain attempting to track me down?” He’s not actually annoyed about it.

Anymore.

“For fuck’s sake,” Mu Qingfang mutters, and Shen Qingqiu suppresses his grin. Mu Shidi! Cursing? Shen Qingqiu has delicate ears! “I suggested that Zhangmen Shixiong speak directly with you about any misunderstandings that may exist between the two of you. Because that is the *adult* thing to do. You know? *Talk* to people? Maybe tell them exactly *why* you’re pissed off at them so they have a chance to explain.”

Okay, Shen Qingqiu thinks that remark is a little pointed!

“Or maybe,” Mu Shidi continues without a pause, “You could tell someone just how bad you fucked up at something, something that might have had consequences for a lot of other people.”

Is he still talking about Yue Qingyuan?

Mu Qingfang closes his diatribe with, “But what do I know? I’m just a doctor.”

Very much appreciating this vicious side to his Shidi, Shen Qingqiu says, “Mu Shidi is quite …assertive these days.”

To his surprise, Mu Qingfang actually snaps at him! “Believe me, Shixiong, you *don’t* want me to tell you how great this week is going. You really, *really* don’t.”

Shen Qingqiu meets his gaze. Maybe the thing on Ku Xing peak is bothering Mu Shidi more than he thought. He certainly seems stressed, and much quicker to anger than Shen Qingqiu remembers. Perhaps this goes along with how extra comforting the man is with his sick patients. Shen Qingqiu looks away and says, “Zhangmen Shixiong finally confessed to me.”

And then- Mu Shidi just *beams* at him! “Oh, that’s great news! I’m so happy for you two!”

Shen Qingqiu frowns. “What are you-” All at once he understands, and exhales heavily. “It was not a *love* confession, Mu Shidi!” Seriously, does Mu Shidi think that *he's* the kind of person that others just *randomly* confess their undying love to? Ridiculous! Also, the idea of *Qi-ge* being romantically interested in him is too horrifying to contemplate. Shen Qingqiu would rather eat his sword! “Have you always been so-?" *Ridiculous* he doesn’t say. "*Anyway*. As I was *saying*, Yue Shixiong confessed to me …about why…”

Realization dawns and Mu Qingfang’s eyes widen. “Oh, *that!* Okay, good.” After a moment he says, “How are your hands doing?”

Brightening, Shen Qingqiu says honestly, “Improved.”

Mu Qingfang smiles at him, bright and wide. “Great.”

Resisting the urge to stare-people don’t just give Shen Qingqiu looks like that!- he sniffs instead. “Well, I suppose you should join me for tea sometime soon, since you’ll be waiting for a replacement tea set for months no doubt.” Also, it’s a little odd, Shen Qingqiu thinks, because Mu Shidi doesn’t strike him as particularly clumsy. “What did you say happened to yours?”

Expression strained, Mu Qingfang meets his eyes but Shen Qingqiu already knows somehow exactly what happened. That Mu Shidi must have thrown it across the room in frustration or something. Several long moments pass without comment, so Shen Qingqiu gently prods, “Shidi?”

Mu Qingfang looks down at his desk again. It’s the same spot he was looking at before. “An accident.”

Sure, it was. “I have a free afternoon in two days if you would care to join me at my peak.” Shen Qingqiu tells him casually. Was that casual? He has no idea.

Thinking about it, Mu Shidi says, “That should be fine, barring anything unexpected.” He leans forward. “While you’re here can I scan your meridians?”

Sighing deeply, Shen Qingaiu tugs his sleeve back and offers his wrist. The gentle sweep of Mu Qingfang’s qi through his cultivation system is whisper soft. “That’s much better, Shen Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang says. Something eases in Shen Qingqiu’s chest when the healer is finished and he feels his body relax. “There,” Mu Qingfang adds, “That should help.”

Shen Qingqiu can’t help wondering how much of the damage he’s sustained over the years was from that first, false manual his shixiongs had given him. It reminds him- “My youngest disciple, Luo Binghe. When your disciple returned him to my peak, she informed me that he had been cultivating with a fake manual.”

Mu Qingfang’s eyes are serious. “Yes. His meridians show similar damages as your own, actually.”

Shen Qingqiu’s fingers clench in his robes. He can’t prevent the disgust from showing on his face. “As one would expect, given that someone gave him the same manual *I* was given as a

disciple."

Gratifyingly, Mu Qingfang looks just as outraged as Shen Qingqiu feels. Clenching his fist on the desk, Mu Shidi says, "Well, *that's* infuriating."

"Yes," Shen Qingqiu agrees, still upset that that damned thing hadn't been destroyed before now. He takes no insignificant amount of pleasure knowing that he personally incinerated the false manual. "I wanted to let you know I took care of it, before you went running to the sect leader."

Tilting his head to the side, Mu Qingfang looks confused. "I…assumed that you would?" he says slowly.

Narrowing his eyes, Shen Qingqiu watches the healer closely. He doesn't seem to be lying. Can it be…he really thinks that? He has much to think about. Standing, Shen Qingqiu says, "I will take my leave." He pins Mu Shidi in place with his gaze. "My residence, two days hence." He doesn't wait for confirmation, but turns on his heel and strides out.

Back on Qing Jing peak, he decides he better check on his troublesome disciples. Surreptitiously, he uses a stealth talisman to divert attention from himself and walks over to the music pavilion. The youngest disciples are first taught by hallmasters, and then when the student is advanced enough, personally instructed by Shen Qingqiu himself.

Carefully peeking into the classroom where Luo Binghe should be, Shen Qingqiu is at least gratified to see the boy actually there in class. Unfortunately, music is not this child's strong suit. It's been abundantly clear from the moment he laid eyes on him that Luo Binghe will be a physical cultivator. His potential is really boundless. Shen Qingqiu can think this now without any kind of emotion attached to the thought.

Before his recent breakthrough, every time he so much as *thought* about Luo Binghe, it filled Shen Qingqiu with rage, and worse, envy. But standing out here in the corridor watching, it's…it's so *obvious* that Luo Binghe is just a dumb kid torturing his guqin.

Smirking a little, Shen Qingqiu thinks, *I was envious of this brat? Embarrassing.*

Well, at least he's attempting to pluck the strings, although if he keeps using that much force, the string will snap. Turning away from the impending disaster, Shen Qingqiu thinks smugly, that this is why he has hallmasters!

He spends the rest of the day on the backlog of paperwork that never seems to be finished. Shen Qingqiu is glad he doesn't have Shang Shidi's position. He imagines the paperwork must be tripled at least!

Shen Qingqiu puts down his brush after the dinner hour has come and gone. The backache he's acquired will go away with circulation of his qi of course, especially now, but there's something to be said for fresh air and physically *moving*.

He wanders through the bamboo forest with no particular destination in mind. At least, that's his intention. His enhanced hearing picks up the sound of raised voices and struggling. Ning Yingying is there, and so Shen Qingqiu hurries to the site of the problem.

He finds two of his disciples holding Luo Binghe with his arms behind his back so Ming Fan can punch him in the face. Yingying is just standing by fretfully, and Luo Binghe thrashes and snarls against the grip the large boys have on him.

More chickens, Shen Qingqiu thinks sourly. "*WHAT* is going on here?" His voice is like a crack of thunder and everyone freezes where they stand.

Yingying's eyes go wide. "Shizun!" She cries, and runs across the clearing to fling her body against his. Instinctively, he steadies her with a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Ying-er, what's going on?" Shen Qingqiu glares at the boys, and pets her hair.

Like a burst dam, words spill out of her. "Shizun, A-Luo was trying to chop wood and the boys started bullying him! They stole his precious necklace and threw it away! " She looks up at him with teary eyes.

Shen Qingqiu eyes the boys. Incredibly, Shao Tengfei and Qian Xueqin are still holding Luo Binghe. He narrows his eyes at them, and they let him go. Luo Binghe looks like he's considering punching them in the face. It would probably do them good, so Shen Qingqiu *might* forget to notice if the brat actually stands up for himself.

Ming Fan, now that's a different story. He's already been punished for messing with Luo Binghe-preventing him from *eating*, it makes Shen Qingqiu *furious* every time he thinks about it. Clearly, his former head disciple deserves *special attention*. "Ming Fan," Shen Qingqiu says coldly. "Explain, and *do not lie to me*."

Ming Fan shuffles his feet and tells him a bullshit story about Luo Binghe bragging (Ha! *This kid*?) about a jade necklace and Ming Fan deciding to teach him a lesson.

"Was the lesson meant to teach him to hate you? And your cohorts?" Shen Qingqiu asks. "Congratulations, goal met."

Ning Yingying tugs on Shen Qingqiu's robes. "Shizun, they threw his necklace! Make them find it!"

He glances down at her teary face and runs a hand over her hair. "Quiet," he says in a much different tone of voice. He extends his qi out through the bamboo forest and finds a trinket saturated with Luo Binghe's energy hanging high off a branch. A moment later, it comes shooting across the clearing and Shen Qingqiu plucks it easily out of the air.

A single glance tells him it's fake. No doubt Ming Fan decided to rub Luo Binghe's nose in that fact. "Binghe, come here." Shen Qingqiu glares at Shao Tengfei and Qian Xueqin, daring them to say anything. But they let him go, and Luo Binghe hesitantly approaches. "Is this yours?"

Luo Binghe's face fills with relief, and his eyes fill with tears. *What the hell?* "Yes, Shizun."

Shen Qingqiu ties a knot in the string and loops it over Binghe's head. "Take care of your things lest they be lost forever," he admonishes sternly.

"Thanking Shizun." Luo Binghe bows.

"Yingying, take Luo Binghe to the dining hall and make sure he *eats*." Shen Qingqiu waits until she's led the younger boy away. He turns his attention to his three recalcitrant disciples.

"Tell me," Shen Qingqiu says smoothly. "What are you supposed to be studying on Qing Jing peak?" No one answers, and he arches an eyebrow. "No one? Ming Fan," Shen Qingqiu's voice is like the crack of a whip. "What do we study here?"

"The four arts, Shizun!" Ming Fan hastily answers.

"And do we also learn *strategy*?" He asks. Without bothering to wait for a response, Shen Qingqiu plows ahead. "What benefit is there to bullying your shidi? Preventing him from eating? In the event he was harmed and died, who do you imagined would be blamed?"

Qian Xueqin swallows. "You?"

Shen Qingqiu throws his head back and *laughs*. Still smiling, he says, "I don't *think* so." He starts pacing back and forth, hands clasped behind his back. "I am the second in command of the entire *Sect*. And I don't need anyone's permission to throw the lot of you out, or beat your backs bloody." Though he doesn't have the same taste for punishment as he used to before his breakthrough for some reason.

"So tell me again, what would happen if you three *idiots* actively harmed another disciple in my care."

Shao Tengfei's eyes widen. "We would be dismissed from the sect?" he whispers.

"Quite right," Shen Qingqiu agrees. He snorts. "Have any of you *young masters* thought about what it would be like, living on the streets? No money, no food. Knowing just enough cultivation to get yourselves killed or else be used as a cauldron." Shen Qingqiu smiles coldly and all three disciples blanch at the sight. "I imagine that none of you would last very long."

"Hear me well," Shen Qingqiu says. "Luo Binghe survived on the streets for *years* alone and unwanted. You three think *you* can teach him lessons? Pah! He could teach *you*. Now. Go run fifty laps around the base of the mountain and then present yourselves to the bamboo house when you're finished."

He watches the disciples scatter. Sometimes he has no idea if he's doing the right thing or not. There was a time pretty recently when he might have gotten the discipline whip and given them a thorough thrashing.

Something about this breakthrough though…Shen Qingqiu frowns and glares at the ground. It's changed him in a way that feels significant, but yet he can't entirely put his finger on

what it *means*. A stray thought occurs to him and he wonders how Mu Shidi would have handled such disobedient disciples.

Shen Qingqiu huffs a little. He'd probably give them a gentle scolding and guilt them until they were all in tears.

Regardless, Shen Qingqiu has had enough dealing with people today. He retreats to the bamboo house. He needs tea.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: So, to recap, if you deliberately harm a disciple, who gets in trouble for it?

Random disciple #1: Uh, you?

SQQ: HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA *takes a deep breath* HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA
Wipes eyes No, seriously though

SQQ : I bet Mu Shidi gently scolds his disciples and guilts them into tears

MQF a few chapters from now: Gently scolds and guilts them into tears

Was it just the other day I was like, well I can write shorter chapters!

Current me: Can I though? Clearly not!

I'm so glad you guys are enjoying SQQ's POV! I'm enjoying writing it! Come tell me what you think!

SQQ Extra part 4

Chapter Summary

This extra takes place in chapters 6-7 of the main story.

Chapter warnings: NONE

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Qingqiu arrives at Qiong Ding peak early and walks directly to Yue Qingyuan's residence. He gives the door a perfunctory knock and then walks in. "Qi-ge?"

"I'll be out momentarily," Yue Qingyuan calls.

Deciding to do something productive, Shen Qingqiu begins making tea. He's had the displeasure of drinking Yue Qingyuan's tea in the past and vowed long ago not to repeat that mistake. It's ready when Qi-ge emerges from the back room, dressed in his typical black and silver robes, and his hair up in the overly large crown.

Qi-ge smiles when he spots Shen Qingqiu at the table already. "Thank you for preparing tea," he says happily, kneeling at his cushion.

Shen Qingqiu arches an eyebrow and takes a sip of tea. With their shared history and cleared misunderstanding, it's nice to be together without acrimony. The worst of Shen Qingqiu's resentment has resolved, but he'd be lying if he said everything was easily forgotten. Forgiving is easy, Shen Qingqiu thinks. But it's difficult to forget all those years spent being tortured, while he waited for a rescue that never came.

Deliberately, Shen Qingqiu circulates his qi. Qi-ge was in his own impossible situation, and nearly killed himself trying to get back to Shen Qingqiu. Shen Qingqiu decides that he better focus on today, on *now* and shoves thoughts of the past to the back of his mind. "Is there anything in particular on the agenda for today's meeting?"

Yue Qingyuan looks thoughtful. "Shang Qinghua had some concerns about some medical paperwork that everyone needs to fill out. Mu Shidi is supposed to talk to us about it."

"Hmm." Shen Qingqiu says. He waits until Qi-ge takes a sip and says, "I invited him for tea yesterday."

As expected, Yue Qingyuan chokes. He blinks in astonishment. "Xiao Jiu, really?"

Looking away, Shen Qingqiu says only, "Mn."

Leaning forward, Yue Qingyuan says, “And how did that go?” He is the very picture of an older brother right now.

Sighing heavily, Shen Qingqiu says, “It was…pleasant. He is good company.” He glances across the table and wants to smack that beaming look right off Qi-ge’s face. “*What.*”

Yue Qingyuan laughs and leans back. “Nothing! It’s just good to see you interacting with people. I haven’t been able to say, but…I’ve been worried about you for a long time.”

Frowning, Shen Qingqiu echoes, “Worried? Why?”

Snorting, Yue Qingyuan says, “It’s been apparent for many years that Xiao Jiu has been very much *alone*.” His eyes, when they meet Shen Qingqiu’s are all too knowing. “It’s why I was never too bothered by you going down to the brothel.”

Shen Qingqiu stares down at the table. “One of Cheng Yi’s girls is pregnant. I’m hoping Mu Shidi will agree to see her at some point.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that at all,” Yue Qingyuan assures him. “Over the years Mu Shidi has brought many people back to his peak and offered them jobs or training.” Qi-ge grins. “Some of them were brothel workers, some were people injured during sect missions.” He frowns. “Perhaps that was the prior generation. I do know that there was a mortal hallmaster on Qian Cao for many years, though I believe he’s now retired.”

“And Mu Shidi just…*shared* all of that with you?” Shen Qingqiu says incredulously.

“Oh, no. Of course not. Some of my disciples are trained to visit other peaks and just… observe.” Yue Qingyuan says.

Narrowing his eyes, Shen Qingqiu says deceptively mildly, “You had better hope that none of your *spies* are ever caught on my peak, Qi-ge.” He says pleasantly, “Because I will toss them right off the mountain, and task Mu Shidi with putting them back together.”

Yue Qingyuan throws his head back and laughs.

They end up walking over to the meeting pavilion together, and more than a few of their fellow peak lords do a double take at the sight of them not sniping at each other. Wei Qingwei walks toward the sect leader with determination, so Shen Qingqiu takes his usual seat at the right of the sect leader’s place at the head of the table. Usually, Wei Qingwei and Shang Qinghua sit across from Shen Qingqiu.

He can’t help smirking as the seat beside him remains empty while others continue to file in. Mu Qingfang shows up and looks around for a moment, before Qi-ge greets him from behind, startling the healer. Shen Qingqiu suppresses a smile at the sight. Yue Qingyuan invites Mu Shidi for tea after the meeting--Qi-ge, you *brat!*.

“Sit down, Mu Shidi,” Shen Qingqiu says, “The sooner we get started the sooner we can get finished.”

Mu Qingfang gives him a grateful look (*why*?) and sits down at Shen Qingqiu's right. Shang Qinghua rushes in the doors in a flurry of scrolls and paperwork.

"Sorry, sorry," Shang Qinghua cries, sitting down on the other side of the table between Wei Qingwei and Liu Qingge.

Yue Qingyuan starts the meeting, so Shen Qingqiu grabs the tea service and pours himself a cup. He catches Mu Qingfang's eyes and arches an eyebrow in question. Mu Qingfang slides his cup over and Shen Qingqiu pours for him.

Shen Qingqiu ignores the glare from Liu Qingge, he's always glaring about *something*, but it must be bothering Mu Shidi because he begins aggressively bouncing his leg under the table. Gritting his teeth, Shen Qingqiu attempts to ignore it, until his tea cup begins migrating across the table.

He rests his hand on his lap for a moment, and when Mu Shidi continues *bouncing*, Shen Qingqiu clamps his hand down on the other man's thigh, squeezing harshly. Mu Qingfang jumps. When he looks over at Shen Qingqiu, Shen Qingqiu gives him a quelling look until Mu Shidi stops.

Narrowing his eyes, Shen Qingqiu withdraws his hand. Next to him, Mu Shidi tries to cover his grin, and *that* makes Shen Qinqqiu snap his fan open to hide his smirk.

The meeting progresses and eventually Shang Shidi clears his throat and says, "Mu Shidi has something to discuss."

Shen Qingqiu hides another smirk. The irritation is positively oozing from Mu Qingfang. Mu Shidi goes on to talk about the proxy forms needed in case of aphrodisiac poisoning. Of course this nets a round of laughter from many peak lords.

Shen Qingqiu certainly doesn't find it funny to be forced to have sex with someone or else *die*. His mouth tightens when Mu Shidi announces that he will no longer be providing services for dual cultivation and then Liu Shidi has the nerve to complain about it!

"Why can't it be you?" Liu Qingge demands, like Mu Shidi took away his favorite toy.

Mu Qingfang is obviously annoyed when he says flatly, "This master had no idea he was held in such high esteem. I appreciate the thought but the fact remains I do not wish to provide such services any more. My reasons are my own." After a moment he adds, "One other thing. You must have *consent* from the person whose name you write down. Without consent the act is *rape* and that will not be tolerated."

Liu Shidi says, "But-"

Oh, fuck him. Shen Qingqiu interrupts, "As expected from such a *brute*. Liu Shidi should remember that he always has the *choice* not to rush in headlong, and actually do some research or heavens forbid *ask for help*-"

"Oh, like I'd trust anything *you* have to say!" Liu Shidi glares across the table.

“ENOUGH,” Qi-ge says icily, and flexes his qi repressively. “Liu Shidi can trust information he gets from Shen Shidi. It is unbecoming for peak lords to act like children.” He glances down the table. “Mu Shidi, did you have anything to add?”

Mu Qingfang rubs his forehead. “I suggest everyone make their decision with all haste, lest you be poisoned and have no choice in the matter.” He glares down at the table and starts bouncing his leg.

Shen Qingqiu sighs heavily and watches his teacup start traveling down the table again. He really needs to address his own emergency form but it’s something he would *much* rather not think about.

The topic thankfully moves on to winemaking. Mu Shidi glances his way and Shen Qingqiu meets his eyes directly. *STOP BOUNCING* he thinks as loudly as he can, trying to transmit the words with his gaze alone.

Mu Shidi smiles politely, not having a clue.

Fine, Shen Qingqiu thinks. He leans back and adjusts his robes, then snakes out his hand and pinches Mu Qingfang’s thigh *hard*. He leans over and hisses, “Stop. Bouncing.”

“Sorry, I can’t help it,” Mu Qingfang protests, giving Shen Qingqiu a wide eyed look of dismay.

Okay, Shidi, then Shen Qingqiu can’t help *this*. He lays his fan on the table and says, “Zhangmen Shixiong, perhaps we should finish up now and let the others go? I know you wanted to speak with Mu Shidi rather *urgently*.”

The Zui Xian peak lord, Hao Qingshui, trails off in confusion, since Shen Qingqiu just viciously undercut him in front of everyone. Sorry Hao Shidi, Shen Qingqiu thinks smugly.

“Lovely,” Yue Qingyuan says into the pained silence that follows. “Let us end the meeting here, and I will see you all next month. Shen Shidi, Mu Shidi, please join me for a quick cup of tea.”

Mu Qingfang leans close, and says, “I can’t believe you did that.”

Smirking, Shen Qingqiu says sweetly, “Next time Mu Shidi should listen to his shixiong.” He stands. “Come along, Shidi. Mustn’t keep Yue Shixiong waiting.”

Mu Shidi waits for Shen Qingqiu to lead the way. All right, if he wants to be deferential, Shen Qingqiu thinks, amused. He walks right into Qi-ge’s house without knocking and then strolls right into the kitchen to prepare tea.

“Shen Shidi is convinced his tea is better,” Yue Qingyuan says sheepishly to Mu Qingfang, as he kneels down at the table.

Mu Shidi settles across from Qi-ge and Shen Qingqiu catches him stealing a glance into the kitchen. “Do not,” Shen Qingqiu warns, “under any circumstances, allow the sect leader to brew you tea.”

Qi-ge looks pleased at the teasing and even more so when Mu Shidi says, “Shen Shixiong’s tea is very good.”

Leaning forward, Qi-ge says, “Oh, have you had the opportunity to partake already?” He smiles like this is genuinely delightful to hear and Shen Qingqiu rolls his eyes.

“Don’t fish for information Qi-ge, it’s unbecoming,” Shen Qingqiu scolds lightly, bringing the tea service to the table and setting it down. Yue Qingyuan reaches out to pour and Shen Qingqiu smacks his hand with his fan. Mu Qingfang snickers, while Shen Qingqiu pours.

Mu Qingfang looks a little confused to be here, so Shen Qingqiu gives Qi-ge a look that says *get on with it*.

“Mu Shidi has been very busy since the last time I saw him,” Yue Qingyuan says, once he has taken a sip of tea.

Shifting uncomfortably, Mu Qingfang says, “Yes. Zhangmen Shixiong, I should apologize for the way we parted during our session-”

Qi-ge holds up a hand. “Ah, Shidi. I didn’t ask you here for that. I wanted to *thank* you for your intervention.” Yue Qingyuan looks earnest. “Without your intervention, I would not have been able to reconcile with Shen Shidi.”

Rolling his eyes, Shen Qingqiu says acidly, “Because why would you bother *explaining* when you could give me useless apologies instead.” He meets Mu Qingfang’s gray-green eyes. “In this *isolated* case, the sect leader is correct. Thanking Mu Shidi.”

Mu Qingfang bites his lip and Shen Qingqiu blinks. *Is he…shy?* “I just…anyone would have-”

Mildly, Shen Qingqiu says, still meeting his gaze, “We have already established that anyone *wouldn’t*, Shidi, do keep up.”

“I’m glad for the two of you,” Mu Qingfang says.

This close, Shen Qingqiu thinks that Mu Shidi’s eyes are…really quite interesting. Like the color of the sea when it storms, he thinks and then feels strange. *Where in the world*? Anyway! “That reminds me. Qi-ge, Mu Shidi thought that when you confessed to me that it was a *love confession*.” He really can’t help smiling. As long as he lives, that will never not be funny.

Mu Qingfang covers his eyes and sighs.

Laughing, Yue Qingyuan says, “Really? I’m afraid not. I raised Shen Shidi from when he was an infant.” He looks over at Shen Qingqiu with warm eyes. “Perhaps I should start calling him Shen Didi.”

“Try it,” Shen Qingqiu retorts, eyes narrowing, “If you want to die today.” The words come so easily to his lips, even after all these years of not really talking to each other. Falling into the same speech patterns like when they were street rats. He says to Mu Shidi, “Anyway,

since Yue Shixiong won't come out and say it, he's trying to ask if there's anything he can do for you."

Frowning, Mu Shidi says, "I'm good, thanks."

Shen Qingqiu exchanges glances with Qi-ge, and Mu Qingfang says defensively, "What? I'm *fine*."

"Oh, indeed," Shen Qingqiu drawls. He arches an eyebrow. "You're so 'fine' that your head disciple had to force you to take time off before you collapsed from exhaustion." He taps a finger to his lips thoughtfully. "I seem to recall a saying about that, what was it? Ah." He leans forward, going for the kill. "Physician, heal yourself."

For a moment, Mu Qingfang looks absolutely *outraged*. Cute, Shen Qingqiu thinks.

"Thanking Shixiong for worrying about this useless Shidi," Mu Shidi says through clenched teeth.

Oh, gods Shen Qingqiu thinks and then *laughs* with his whole chest, the sound just bubbling out. His eyes are scrunched up so much it's hard to see, and his *cheeks* hurt. He wipes his eyes.

Mu Qingfang says, "Ah, I should probably leave first," he says, looking uncomfortable.

"Trying to escape already?" Shen Qingqiu teases. He waves a hand in the air. "Fine, go ahead. But Shidi, I am *serious*. I am a man who pays his debts."

Standing up, Mu Qingfang smiles slyly. "How can there be debts when no payment was ever needed." He bows to Yue Qingyuan, and then to Shen Qingqiu, meeting his eyes. "Thank you for the tea, it was indeed delicious."

Once he's gone, Yue Qingyuan leans back and gives Shen Qingqiu a long look.

"What?" Shen Qingqiu snaps. "What is that look?"

Qi-ge just smiles smugly and holds up his hands. "Nothing. Nothing at all, Xiao Jiu. I just… have never seen you tease anyone else before."

Shen Qingqiu opts to ignore that and pours more tea. "He is my least offensive Shidi, that's all."

"Mm," Qi-ge hums and then his black eyes get that glint that Shen Qingqiu remembers from long ago. "I suppose we can't hold it against Mu Shidi if he was momentarily stunned by the sight of Xiao Jiu *laughing*, it's as rare as a blue moon."

Pressing his lips together, Shen Qingqiu resists the urge to toss his tea over Yue Qingyuan's head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Nodding, agreeably, Yue Qingyuan says, “Naturally not. This Qi-ge should check his vision.” The smile lingers on his mouth however.

Shen Qingqiu huffs. “I don’t care if you *are* the sect leader, I can and will still beat you up.”

That makes Yue Qingyuan laugh. “Shen Didi is always welcome to *try*.”

Chapter End Notes

YQY: Is Xiao Jiu...making *friends*

SQQ: I will *END* you

YQY: *beams*

This chapter surprised me! I was not expecting it to be a showcase of 7/9 friendship! Come tell me what you think!!

SQQ extra part 5

Chapter Summary

This extra takes place during chapter 8 of the main story.

Chapter warnings: FLUFF!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Qingqiu would like it known that he's not feeling restless because he's *nervous*. As the second in command of the Cang Qiong mountain sect, he does not *get* nervous. He also would not describe himself as *anxious*. So what if he's prowling around Qing Jing peak, waiting for it to be time to go visit Mu Shidi? He has to keep track of his idiot disciples lest they all somehow kill themselves with stupidity.

Surprisingly, he finds Ming Fan and his two idiot friends actually meditating in one of the outdoor pavilions. Hmm. Good. Yingying and Binghe are suspiciously nowhere to be seen, so Shen Qingqiu walks over to the library and wanders through.

There he finds Ning Yingying and Luo Binghe bent over a book of poetry with ground ink waiting and a pile of blank paper in front of them.

Satisfied, Shen Qingqiu does not disturb them. He comes across some older disciples working on various projects and does check in with them. Instructing the oldest disciples is actually somewhat rewarding.

Over the years, Qing Jing peak hasn't taken in many disciples. None since Luo Binghe, actually. Shen Qingqiu frowns and lengthens his stride. At the disciple selection this summer, he better pick one or two. Still, better to have fewer disciples but higher quality.

Sometimes he looks back and wonders why he was so set on having Luo Binghe as his disciple. Before his breakthrough, the very sight of the kid made Shen Qingqiu feel like having a qi deviation. Now, it's just obvious that Binghe is a very square peg trying to fit into a small round hole.

Idly, he wonders what a Bai Zhan Luo Binghe might look like. The idea is appalling, even if Binghe isn't the usual Qing Jing material. Given his potential, Shen Qingqiu imagines that Binghe could someday surpass Liu Qingge. If, that is, someone trained him as a physical cultivator.

Shen Qingqiu has neither the skill nor the aptitude to do so. He supposes if Luo Binghe works hard enough, he would become passable with spiritual techniques. Still. The boy will

never thrive until he receives instruction as a physical cultivator. Shen Qingqiu will have to figure out what to do about that, but he has a few years at least.

For a moment, Shen Qingqiu entertains the idea of asking Liu Qingge to…No! Absolutely not! There is no way he's asking that brute for a favor! Besides, the only way that their resident *war god* would ever even consider doing *anything* Shen Qingqiu asked for, would be if Liu Qingge somehow owed him a life debt.

That seems unlikely.

Anyway, Shen Qingqiu stalks around his peak until he can't take the waiting anymore and finally just decides to leave for Qian Cao. He can always claim to have gotten the time wrong.

Mu Qingfang opens his door and looks happy upon seeing Shen Qingqiu. He invites him in asking, "Would you like some tea first? Or shall we visit the garden?" Mu Qingfang is dressed in simpler robes today, in dark green with lighter blue accents along the shoulders. His hair is pulled neatly back into a long ponytail, and it's high enough that it flips back and forth over Mu Shidi's shoulders whenever he turns his head.

"The weather is good, Mu Shidi, and I very much want to see your collection," Shen Qingqiu says. It's true. He was delightfully surprised to hear that Mu Shidi has a collection of demonic plants.

His reward for this comment is a bright smile, and Mu Shidi says, "Great, let's go!"

The garden is not far from Mu Qingfang's home, just a five minute walk. It's fenced in, which given the occupants, is probably a good thing. They walk through a wooden gate and Mu Qingfang leads him to a row of plants.

Shen Qingqiu watches Mu Shidi talk about the Dragon's Flame Oleander with enthusiasm. It's under a rather impressive series of arrays, and when Shen Qingqiu asks about the effects of the plant, he is more than a little surprised at the answer he gets!

Bouncing on his feet happily, Mu Qingfang says, "Oh! I'm glad you asked. It's quite poisonous to humans, of course. The spores are neurotoxic-"

Shen Qingqiu's eyebrows shoot to his hairline. *Really, Shidi?*

"-Causing prolonged pain and muscle spasms which progress to full paralysis-"

"And you keep this in your *garden*?" Shen Qingqiu can't help interrupting.

Mu Qingfang just looks adorably confused. "What? It's contained. Anyway, for many *demon* species, the pollen from this plant is harvested and condensed into pills which treat energy imbalances. It's a good source of yang, obviously." Mu Shidi finishes this speech with all the aplomb of an experienced lecturer.

Shen Qingqiu smirks a little. "*Obviously*. Please," he continues, "Show me *more*."

And Mu Qingfang does. He lectures about each plant like it's a beloved family member, even the ones which are quite …something. Shen Qingqiu is glad there's a tiny sign warning any unwary visitors that the delicious looking peaches are actually embedded with acid-filled ants. He snickers a little, imagining Mu Shidi out here painting the sign earnestly, trying to prevent any wandering idiots from eating these fruits.

The next plant is a vigorous looking bush that Mu Qingfang informs him is a little bloodthirsty. Mu Shidi demonstrates by picking up a twig and tossing it into the bush. Two vines whip out and snap the twig easily, and then! Mu Qingfang *apologizes* to the bush for *teasing* it.

This…this really is too cute, Shen Qingqiu thinks. "You talk to the plants?" He means this as a gentle tease but Mu Shidi answers the question truthfully.

"Well, yes," Mu Qingfang says sheepishly. "I got used to talking to patients that are unresponsive, you know, and that habit kind of just…carried over…" He ducks his head in embarrassment.

Shen Qingqiu watches Mu Qingfang's face intently. Why does it seem sometimes, like he's much younger than he should be? As far as he knows, Mu Shidi is actually a couple of years *older* than Shen Qingqiu. But, honestly, it kind of feels like- Mu Shidi glances up and their eyes meet.

Clearing his throat, Mu Qingfang looks away. "Ah, Shen Shixiong, just wait until you see what's down at the end of the row!" He reaches out and tugs Shen Qingqiu's sleeve a little. "Come on, I can't *wait* to see your reaction."

Snorting a little, Shen Qingqiu says, "I had no idea that Mu Shidi was so *enthusiastic* about gardening."

"Well, I like monsters," Mu Qingfang says. "And demonic plants are the next best thing, you'll see."

The ground under Shen Qingqiu's boots starts crunching, and he frowns. "Is that frost?" He glances around at the obvious warm and humid day. "Mu Shidi what *are* you growing over here?"

Face glowing, Mu Qingfang bounces up on his toes. "It's a Snow Lion Bush!" he exclaims happily. "Come see!"

Mu Shidi practically drags Shen Qingqiu further up the row, and Shen Qingqiu, deeply amused, allows it without complaint. He's pretty sure that even Qi-ge might hesitate before attempting to *drag* him anywhere. Anyway, Shen Qingqiu is quite charmed by it. Just as they reach the end of the row, he sees a bush with shiny dark leaves and red berries--Shen Qingqiu blinks in surprise and then laughs out loud when a small drift of snow explodes at them, covering them with flurries.

Next to him, Mu Shidi is laughing uproariously, and the plant throws more snow at them. Thick snowflakes land in Mu Qingfang's hair and eyelashes, and when their eyes meet, Shen

Qingqiu can't look away.

For a long moment, they're just grinning at each other. Then Shen Qingqiu says, "Mu Shidi is certainly full of surprises these days." His smile lingers as he watches the Snow Lion Bush rustle its leaves at them.

Mu Qingfang explains that Shang Qinghua came across one of these plants a few months ago (Shen Qingqiu remains himself to someday ask exactly *why* Shang Qinghua was wandering around the Northern Demonic territory) and thought it might have some medical use.

"It doesn't," Mu Shidi says cheerfully, "Not for humans anyway, but it's so *cute* that I couldn't get rid of it."

Shen Qingqiu snorts. "Only you could think a demonic plant is *cute*." He really can't believe how *affectionate* his tone is. What is happening?

"What can I say, I like dangerous things," Mu Qingfang quips easily. His ocean colored eyes are bright with happiness.

"I'm seeing that," Shen Qingqiu says, *way too fondly*!

Mu Shidi tells him about all of his other plants too, as they wander through the garden. Eventually, Mu Qingfang runs out of things to say, and they stand in companionable silence.

"Mu Shidi…" Shen Qingqiu begins, while he watches a bird land on the fence. He doesn't have the right words to say what's on his mind, he knows that but…. Mu Qingfang glances over at him and arches an eyebrow questioningly. Furrowing his brow, Shen Qingqiu says finally, "Mu Shidi seems much different than I recall during our disciple days."

"Oh?" Mu Shidi asks, "In what way?"

Shen Qingqiu tilts his head to the side. *In every way that matters*, he wants to say. *The way you look at me, the way it feels when you treat me, the way you touch me, the way you talk to me…the way I feel when I look at you.* All at once, Shen Qingqiu knows what he wants to say.

It's like you turned into a whole different person overnight.

"Perhaps my memories are faulty." Shen Qingqiu gives Mu Shidi a searching glance. "I remember Mu Shidi being a much more…*distant* person than he is these days."

Mu Qingfang bites his lip then says, "I think I've been burned out for a while." He goes on to tell Shen Qingqiu how he was very focused on his work, just trying to keep people alive. "A few months back I realized that just because the patient may die, it doesn't make the *effort* worthless." He tells Shen Qingqiu of one of his patients, an older man with a memory disorder. "These conditions will get worse, no matter what I do." Mu Qingfang's eyes burn with intensity. "But you know what? It's the *condition* that's worthless, not the *patient*.

"What do you mean?" Shen Qingqiu demands.

Shrugging, Mu Qingfang says, “The patient thinks he’s ten. He wakes up and wants his mother.”

That sounds like hell, Shen Qingqiu thinks, and he presses his lips together. He wipes all expression from his face, lest he show too much.

Mu Qingfang continues, “So if I comfort that patient, who currently has the mind of a child, that is not *worthless*.” Ocean eyes meet his own. “It’s *meaningful*. To the patient, but also to *me*.”

Shen Qingqiu never knew that Mu Qingfang could *feel* this much. For the first time, Shen Qingqiu lets a stray thought linger instead of quashing it mercilessly, and that thought is *maybe*.

Maybe they’re much better matched than Shen Qingqiu knew.

They return to Mu Qingfang’s home, and the healer tasks Shen Qingqiu with opening the package from Zui Xian while he makes tea.

Shen Qingqiu means to pull a knife from his sleeves, he always has several with him at any given moment, and the movement of his sweeping sleeve knocks a piece of paper onto the floor. He bends down, picking it up. He glances at it briefly, and then a hot flush sweeps his chest.

His eyes flicker again over the form-*the emergency proxy form*, the one with *Shen Qingqiu’s* name at the bottom of it- and he hides it in his sleeve. His legs feel a little weak so he sits down. Mechanically, he uses his knife to cut the string and opens the package. “Oh, these are-” Frowning, he says, “I don’t know *what* these are actually. But they smell delicious.” It smells sweet, something nutty, but tart at the same time. The cakes themselves are nearly a translucent golden color, slightly crispy on top.

“Those good boys,” Mu Qingfang says warmly from the kitchen. “They sent over water chestnut cakes. I just *love* them. I hope you will enjoy them as much.” He brings the tea service to the table and sets it down. He puts a plate and cup in front of Shen Qingqiu and then for himself. “Why don’t you serve while I pour?”

Using his trusty knife, Shen Qingqiu cuts pieces and serves them each a section. “Sticky.” Shen Qingqiu won’t lie, he’s eager to taste this! It’s as delightful as it smells, and he can’t help closing his eyes for a moment, savoring every crumb. “Oh, this is-” *so fucking good*, he does NOT say. “*Very* good.” He meets Mu Qingfang’s eyes. “Well? What are you waiting for?” He prods. “Eat!”

Shen Qingqiu’s heart nearly stops when Mu Qingfang takes a bite and then softly moans, “*Fuuuck*.” Mu Shidi’s eyes are closed, and the way his neck moves when he swallows…

The conversation continues with Mu Shidi asking about things on Shen Qingqiu’s peak and specifically (though he doesn’t exactly ask about him directly) how Luo Binghe is doing.

“My little beasts are doing fine, even your favorite,” Shen Qingqiu gives Mu Qingfang a direct look.

Then Mu Shidi lies through his teeth. “Binghe’s not my *favorite*.”

Ha! Nice try, Shidi! “Mu Shidi, *please*, you barely managed that with a straight face,” Shen Qingqiu accuses warmly.

With a little eye roll, Mu Qingfang says, “Okay, *fine*, he’s just a cute little kid, that’s all! He’s so-” Mu Shidi grins. “Fluffy.”

Imagining Luo Binghe’s face if he overheard his beloved Mu Shishu talk about him like that is deliciously funny, and Shen Qingqiu remarks on it. “The funny thing is that Luo Binghe would *die* if he overheard Mu Shidi saying it." Shen Qingqiu watches while Mu Qingfang takes a bite, moans again, and then *sucks his fingers clean*. Is it hot in here? Shen Qingqiu thinks he may start sweating, and hastily circulates his qi. All of the sudden, awareness of the form tucked away in his sleeve becomes crucially important and Shen Qingqiu makes his excuses.

He’s more abrupt than he means to be, Shen Qingqiu realizes, watching Mu Shidi positively deflate.

“I really enjoyed spending time with you,” Mu Shidi says, standing up and meeting his eyes. “Thanking Shixiong.”

Shen Qingqiu can’t seem to look away. “Perhaps Shidi might help me with his hands later this week, if he has time?” He doesn’t feel guilty about this pretext whatsoever.

Brightening, Mu Shidi says, “Oh, of course! Anytime.”

Inclining his head, Shen Qingqiu bids him good evening and then quickly walks to the Healing Pavilion. The Qian Cao disciples look unnerved to see him, and within moments, the head disicple greets him in the hallway.

“Shen Shibo,” Wu Yanshin says. “Do you need help with something?” Her sharp eyes sweep over him briefly. “Are you injured?”

Eyeing her carefully, Shen Qingqiu says, “I have a form to turn in, but I need to sign it first.”

“I see,” Wu Yanshin says. “Please come this way.” She turns and walks down a hallway before turning into an office. There are clean brushes and prepared ink under a stasis talisman ready for use.

Shen Qingqiu pulls out Mu Shidi’s form and quickly signs it, leaning over the desk. “Here.”

Eyebrows raised, Wu Yanshin says, “This is Shizun’s form.” She meets his eyes.

“So it is,” Shen Qingqiu agrees, waiting to see what *else* she has to say. And she very much looks like she wants to say *something*.

“Shizun-” She starts. With a frown, Wu Yanshin says, “Shizun has a tender heart. He *cares* about people very much.”

Okay? Shen Qingqiu thinks about Mu Shidi laughing in delight as a plant throws snow on them both. “I am aware.”

Her lips press together for a moment and then she adds, “Sometimes people make certain *assumptions* about Shizun. Assumptions which couldn’t be farther from the truth.”

This sounds like she’s telling him not to listen to any rumors about Mu Qingfang. Shen Qingqiu, having been dogged by rumors for over a decade, can relate. “I see,” he says finally, because Disciple Wu is *clearly* waiting for a response. “*Many* people are in fact, victims of *rumors* which have no basis at all in reality.” There, he thinks. Take THAT.

But Wu Yanshin nods, and looks somewhat satisfied. “I will file it appropriately.” She smiles slyly. “Would Shibo like to fill out his *own* form today?” This smile is showing too many teeth, Shizhi!

Shen Qingqiu frowns. He *does* need to fill out his own damned form. “Not today,” he decides. He means to take his leave but adds, “You may contact this master if he can be of assistance to Peak Lord Mu at any time.”

Wu Yanshin’s eyes drop to the form on the desk, and Shen Qingqiu scoffs. “For matters *besides* that.”

For the first time, Wu Yanshin gives Shen Qingqiu an expression that might actually be… approving? He’s not quite sure how he’s managed such an impossible feat but. He’ll take it.

Chapter End Notes

MQF: *is enthusiastic about his demonic plants*
MQF: *tells SQQ about how comforting ppl that won't remember is *meaningful*
MQF: *moans like a whore eating sweet treats*
SQQ: "..."
SQQ: I'M IN TROUBLE HERE

Also please imaging Mr Snow Lion Bush humming "Kiss the girl" while he tosses snow on top of these two dopes. :)

SQQ Extra part 6

Chapter Summary

Takes place during chapter 12-13

Warning for Sexy times

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were times in the past that Shen Qingqiu seriously thought that he wanted Liu Qingge to die. Slowly and painfully, if possible. Each time Liu Qingge beat him into the ground in the name of 'friendly spars,' Shen Qingqiu was left wondering how come the war god didn't just finish the job, he enjoyed it so much.

He's come a long way in a few short months since his breakthrough, Shen Qingqiu thinks. Liu Shidi has mysteriously become much less irritating, for example. But when Mu Qingfang confesses to him that his Shizun *forced him to sleep with patients* as a *cure*, Shen Qingqiu is so angry, he's prepared to backslide and enact whatever ritual he needs to, calling down Mu Shidi's ascended master, just to murder him as painfully as possible.

"Are you telling me," Shen Qingqiu says deceptively softly, "that the last Qian Cao peak lord forced you to have sex with patients?" Right now he feels like righteous fury in human form, and when Mu Shidi answers him with a simple, 'Yeah', Shen Qingqiu wants to go back in time and burn the entire Qian Cao peak to the *ground*.

Mu Shidi looks quite alarmed, and Shen Qingqiu realizes that the murderous intent of his qi has filled the room repressively. He lifts his head and pulls it all back in. He's still just as furious, but it's simmering under his skin now.

"It…was a long time ago," Mu Shidi says quietly, looking down at the table. "And I try not to think about it, to be honest." He peeks over at Shen Qingqiu and then tells him how, when Mu Shidi was made peak lord, he made the aphrodisiac team voluntary.

Shen Qingqui watches him carefully. The other man seems…a little fragile discussing it, and Shen Qingqiu doesn't want to upset him. He suggests they get some sleep, and Mu Shidi agrees.

Mu Qingfang disappears into his section of their rooms, sliding the door closed. Shen Qingqiu just looks at the closed door for several seconds, then flicks privacy and alarm talismans on every door and point of entry.

The next day *is* just as busy as he'd imagined. Shen Qingqiu arranges to do the interviews with Mu Qingfang. After last night's revelations he's *certainly* not letting him out of Shen Qingqiu's sight.

They speak to the farmer's wife, and then visit the farm. They return to the town and speak with the remaining victims. It's a horrible task, asking people about their dead loved ones. Mu Shidi appears more and more stressed with each interview until finally, they have to visit a young couple following the death of their infant child.

Without asking permission, Shen Qingqiu takes the lead on this one. His careful questioning elicits the information that the mother was unable to produce enough milk to feed the baby. Naturally, they couldn't find a wet nurse, and no one had any nursing goats. There was however, a local farmer who sold cow's milk.

When they stand to leave, Shen Qingqiu senses something very *wrong* with Mu Shidi. Mu Qingfang's face, usually so expressive, is a blank mask. Mu Shidi hurries out the door without waiting for Shen Qingqiu whatsoever, and immediately rounds the corner into an alley.

Shen Qingqiu cautiously approaches from behind. Mu Shidi's breaths are rapid and shallow and his shoulders are starting to shake. Mu Qingfang leans one hand on the wall and looks like he's barely keeping his feet.

The sudden *absence* of Mu Shidi breathing rings like an alarm in Shen Qingqiu's head. *Why isn't he breathing?!* "Shidi." Shen Qingqiu says this firmly.

Mu Qingfang brings both hands up to his face, and *shakes*. But he doesn't inhale!

Shen Qingqiu walks close enough that he feels the other man's body heat. "Mu Shidi," he says, "You have to *breathe*-" Now that he's this close, he understands. Mu Shidi is overcome with *despair*.

Having no idea what to do, he just goes with his instincts, and wraps his arms around Mu Qingfang, and holds him snugly against his own body. "Breathe, Shidi, *please*!" Shen Qingqiu says desperately.

Finally, thank all the gods, Mu Shidi takes in a deep shuddering breath. He tries to say something, but the words are lost in sobs. Mu Qingfang just *cries* like his heart is broken beyond repair, and Shen Qingqiu's eyes end up getting a little wet, too.

He buries one hand in Mu Qingfang's hair, holding him at the back of his neck, and the other hand at his lower back, still pressing them together. "I have you," Shen Qingqiu murmurs over and over. "I have you."

It takes a long time for Mu Qingfang's tears to dry. Eventually, he's able to say, "Shixiong," in a voice that's way too thick.

Shen Qingqiu strokes a hand over his hair. "Mn." *I'm here,* he thinks.

Mu Qingfang loosens his arms from around Shen Qingqiu's neck and peeks up at him. From this distance, his ocean colored eyes are nearly glowing. The whites of his eyes are red and glimmering, and Shen Qingqiu thinks he's never looked more beautiful than in that moment.

"Better now?" Shen Qingqiu asks quietly. His hand lingers on Mu Shidi's back, and he wishes he didn't have to let go.

Chewing on his lip, Mu Qingfang says, "Sorry, Shixiong."

Sighing, Shen Qingqiu says, "I didn't ask for apologies, Shidi. So don't give me any." He deliberately lightens his tone. "You know the rules," he says playfully, and even shakes a closed fan at Mu Shidi.

Almost shyly, Mu Shidi says, "You, ah. If word gets out that Shen Shixiong is so good at hugging, you'll have a line wrapped around the block."

That fills Shen Qingqiu's chest with glowing red embers, and the idea of getting to hug Mu Qingfang again…seems….like something he wants to do.

_____

Shen Qingqiu and Mu Shidi go back to the farm and get involved with a demonic beast under a disguise array. Once the array is broken, Shen Qingqiu is occupied with fighting the-Spider-cow! Disgusting!

Turns out it can spit poison, and Shen Qingqiu backflips easily, avoiding the spray. He's aware on some level that Mu Shidi set off an emergency talisman, calling Liu Shidi to their location. So he just has to keep the demonic beast from killing them until the brute arrives.

The Spider cow smashes the stall, sending splinters and wood fragments in all directions, and Shen Qingqiu flash-steps to Mu Shidi, wrapping an arm around him and using Xiu Ya to disintegrate any projectiles.

Not happy about this, the Spider cow stands all the way up, and fuck, it's a lot bigger than Shen Qingqiu thought. It hisses at Shen Qingqiu and he uses a qi enhanced push to get Mu Shidi out of the way and in a safer location.

While Shen Qingqiu battles the thing, Mu Shidi's needles bounce from the hard exoskeleton.

"Where the hell is Liu Qingge?" Mu Shidi demands.

"Late as usual," Shen Qingqiu snarls, and blocks more poison. He senses foul intent and his head snaps around. *Knife* he thinks in alarm, and prepares to block the weapon. But then Mu Qingfang-*that idiot* leaps in front of it!

WHY? WHY would he do that? Shen Qingqiu is so furious, he redoubles his efforts against the Spider cow, throwing all manner of talismans at it. It shrugs them off though, and jumps forward, forcing Shen Qingqiu to jump into the air to avoid getting skewered.

Chang Liu, the dead farmer's wife, says, "Forgiveness Immortal Masters, we truly did not mean any harm. We just wanted to make a living."

"By feeding people milk from a *demonic beast*?" Shen Qingqiu cries incredulously. "Ridiculous!"

The ceiling crashes down suddenly, and a falling rafter knocks Shen Qingqiu to the ground. He rolls immediately, unable to see the Spider Cow, but knowing it's way too close! He ends up getting partially buried under debris and has to work a bit to free his legs.

Liu Qingge rises from the rubble, and although he is quite close to Shen Qingqiu, he can barely see the war god for all the dust in the air.

Mu Qingfang starts screaming in alarm, "Liu Qingge! Shen Qingqiu is trapped under it! Please!"

Shen Qingqiu would answer him, everything in him desperately wants to, but if he does, he'll give away his position, and his legs are still trapped.

Fortunately, Liu Qingge uses a palm strike and blasts the Spider-Cow partially out of the immediate vicinity. "Shen Qingqiu!"

Using a spark of qi, Shen Qingqiu flicks it at Liu Qingge, drawing his eyes. Grey eyes flicker down over his legs, seeing the problem immediately. The spider cow spits venom at Liu Qingge, and he dodges it, leaping over the thing and roughly yanking the heavy beams from Shen Qingqiu's legs.

One of Mu Shidi's disciples appears, the young man, and he takes over getting Shen Qingqiu free while Liu Shidi continues battling the demonic beast. Once it's clear, the Qian Cao disciple helps Shen Qingqiu escape through the maze of fallen beams and walls. Behind him, Shen Qingqiu hears Mu Qingfang still calling for him which is *extremely upsetting*.

He thinks about trying to head back in there, but the disciple says, "Wu Shijie is there, Shen Shibo, she will take care of Shizun. Shizun would want you to be *safe*." This little brat has big wide eyes like Luo Binghe, which definitely don't work on Shen Qingqiu but unfortunately, the kid is correct.

Minutes later, the other Qian Cao disciple appears. "Shen Shibo," she says breathlessly, "Shizun needs you *right now*."

Shen Qingqiu shakes off the male disciple. "What's wrong?"

"He's been poisoned."

Somehow, Mu Shidi's been taken to the *other* side of the barn. That makes sense, Shen Qingqiu supposes but it's not convenient!

"Shizun, listen to me," Wu Yanshin is saying. She lays hand on his face and then takes his pulse. "Shen Qingqiu needs to treat you for aphrodisiac poison, he's already consented, the

form was filled out okay? Shizun, you have to let him treat the poison." She looks up in relief when Shen Qingqiu's shadow falls over them both.

Crouching down, Shen Qingqu lays a hand on Mu Qingfang's burning cheek. "I have you, Mu Shidi." Shen Qingqiu then gathers Mu Qingfang into his arms, standing up with his precious bundle. Through his robes, Shen Qingqiu feels the heat building. Wu Yanshin is right, he needs to treat this *immediately*. He pushes off the earth, calling Xiu Ya to catch them. Mu Shidi's hair has come unbound and whips into his face.

He flies them directly to the Inn, and doesn't speak a word to anyone when he storms in and ascends the stairs to their room. He lays Mu Shidi on his bed, and then puts up privacy and security talismans.

Quickly returning to Mu Qingfang, Shen Qingqiu sits on the side of the bed. "Shidi. Shidi, can you open your eyes?"

Slowly blinking his eyes open, Mu Qingfang looks up at him. "You're all right," he says in relief and cups Shen Qingqiu's cheek. "Shen Qingqiu, I thought you…" His voice catches. "I thought you-"

Shen Qingqiu covers the hand on his cheek with his palm. Then he turns his head, pressing a kiss into Mu Qingfang's palm. "Do you understand, Shidi?" *Do you understand how I want you? That I can't bear to be without you?*

"I-you-" Mu Qingfang stammers in confusion.

"Qingfang, listen to me. You've been poisoned and you require dual cultivation," Shen Qingqiu says urgently. "Wu Shizhi has the form you filled out, naming me your proxy, in case such an event occurred."

Mu Qingfang blinks a few times and looks around in confusion. "I don't…who is… Qingfang?"

Shen Qingqiu closes his eyes for a long moment. Yes, he thinks. Everything makes sense now. When is a cow not a cow? When is Mu Qingfang not Mu Qingfang? In this case, Shen Qingqiu doesn't *care*. Maybe Mu Qingfang got replaced with a *demon* six months ago, it doesn't matter! *This* Mu Qingfang is the one that treated his hands, the one that has demonic plants, the one who takes in every and all stray kids that come into his orbit.

"What's your name?" Shen Qingqiu says finally, staring down into those grey-green eyes. "What should I call you?" *Please, tell me who you are*, he thinks.

Blinking rapidly, the man on the bed says, "Yuan. Shen Yuan."

Gathering his wits, Shen Qingqiu says seriously, "Shen Yuan. I need you to listen carefully. You've been poisoned, and you need treatment with dual cultivation."

Mu Qi-Shen Yuan looks like he's trying to fall asleep, so Shen Qingqiu jostles him gently. "No! You can't sleep yet! Shen Yuan, I need an answer. Can I treat you?" He stares down into

ocean eyes, and then rubs his thumb carefully over Shen Yuan's cheek.

"Okay," Shen Yuan says finally.

Closing his eyes in relief, Shen Qingqiu mutters, "Thank the gods." He swallows hard. He has no idea what he's doing! "I'm going to take your robes off, we need to do this quickly, and…I'm sorry," Shen Qingqiu says truthfully. "I wish-" *That we could take our time with this*. "Next time, maybe."

Pulling one of his knives from his sleeve, Shen Qingqiu slices Shen Yuan's robes right from his body. *Lube*, Shen Qingqiu thinks, and gets off the bed to find some.

"Don't *go*," Shen Yuan calls out, "Come back, *please*-"

Shen Qingqiu doesn't think Mu Shidi ought to be this upset, but he's not the one poisoned. "Shixiong is right here, A-Yuan. Be at ease, I need to get some-" Shen Qingqiu looks around. "Where is that damned qiankun pouch?" He locates the right pouch and then pulls out a jar of ointment. He starts peeling his robes off. Shen Yuan is supremely unconcerned about his nakedness, so Shen Qingqiu is just powering through right now.

When he climbs back up on the bed, Shen Yuan says, "So reliable."

Shen Qingqiu snorts. *Okay,*, he thinks, amused. He drapes himself over Shen Yuan, and the other man lets out a sigh of relief. Shen Yuan hooks his arms around Shen Qingqiu's neck.

"Mn," Shen Yuan hums. "Your hair is so silky." He runs his hands through the long length of hair. Shen Qingqiu startles when something hot touches his buttocks, and smiles when he realizes A-Yuan is just resting his foot on Shen Qingqiu's ass!

"You-" Shen Qingqiu glances down at Shen Yuan's lips. "Shidi, do you want? Can I?"

"That's a good idea!" Shen Yuan agrees immediately. "Shixiong is so smart." He tilts his head up expectantly.

Again, Shen Qingqiu has *no* idea what he's doing! He presses his lips against Shen Yuan's. Shen Yuan sighs happily and parts his lips, so Shen Qingqiu licks right into his mouth. The next thing he knows, Shen Yuan takes control of the kiss, stroking their tongues together, then nibbling on his lips, licking his teeth and then sucking on his tongue.

A deep sound pulls from Shen Qingqiu's throat, and he feels like he might be drowning in how good this feels. Shen Yuan tightens his grip around Shen Qingqiu's neck, and with each thrust of his tongue, A-Yuan grinds up against him.

Breaking away from his mouth, Shen Yuan says, "*More! Pretty Shixiong, please, I need you to- I need-" He kisses Shen Qingqiu's face, his lips, his cheeks. He nibbles on Shen Qingqiu's jawline, and sucks on the skin under his ear. Shen Qingqiu is supposed to be helping Shen Yuan, but it rather feels like he's the one being seduced.*

Shen Yuan shifts the lower part of his body so that his thigh is right between Shen Qingqiu's legs, arching up right against Shen Qingqiu's erection. Not expecting that *at all*, Shen

Qingqiu clutches Shen Yuan desperately.

“Yes, like that,” Shen Yuan breathes in his ear. “Shixiong, I need--I need you-”

Clenching his teeth for a moment, Shen Qingqiu sits up, which for some reason makes Shen Yuan squeal, “Oh, my god, you are so adorable! Your poor hair!”

This ridiculous man! Shen Qingqiu thinks, exasperated. “Turns out your reputation was correct,” he mutters. *Life changing was correct!*

Delighted, Shen Yuan says, “Oh? What reputation?”

“Shidi has much more experience at this than I do,” Shen Qingqiu admits. “I--I don’t want to hurt you.”

You won’t,” Shen Yuan says immediately. “I know you won’t.”

“Can you part your legs?” Shen Qingqiu asks, and Shen Yuan does so eagerly. He eyes Shen Qingqiu’s nude form with appreciation.

“Oh, yes, you’re right, we need oil.” Shen Yuan announces.

“Bossy,” Shen Qingqiu mutters. He reaches with his qi, and calls the small bottle up into his hand.

“Do you know what to do now?” Shen Yuan asks, while Shen Qingqiu messes with the oil on his fingers, “Because-”

Deciding that Shen Yuan is thinking *way* too much about this, Shen Qingqiu leans down and kisses him. Before Shen Yuan gets him too worked up, Shen Qingqiu presses carefully into his body with a slick finger.

Shen Yuan is so deliciously responsive, and so very eager to touch Shen Qingqiu.But apparently, he’s not going fast enough for his poisoned mess of a partner. “Ooh, curl your fingers, that’s it, now *press* when you slide them out-ahhhh!” Shen Yuan’s demands dissolve into a back arching and drawn out moan. “Shixiong, *yes*, my god, just like that, don’t stop, don’t-”

One hand embedded in burning heat, Shen Qingqiu lays his other hand on Shen Yuan’s stomach. His skin is flushed pink, and so very hot to the touch. His erection lays against the smooth skin, a pearly drop at the tip. Unable to resist the temptation, Shen Qingqiu leans down, taking the tip into his mouth, flickering his tongue over the slit and then suckling.

“Shixiong, I’m-”

“Not yet,” Shen Qingqiu says, gripping the base tight.

Shen Yuan throws his head back and groans with frustration. “Shi-xiong!” Shen Yuan pulls one of his legs back to give Shen QIngqiu more room, and gets distracted by his own flexibility. It’s utterly adorable, and Shen Qingqiu is really going to lose his mind-

“That’s going to have to be good enough,” Shen Qingqiu tells him, “because you’re determined to drive me *insane*-” He positions himself at A-Yuan’s entrance, and then Shidi must do *something* because Shen Qingqiu slides home in one smooth stroke.

The next thing he knows, Shen Yuan pulls his face down for more kisses. Shen Qingqiu keeps moving smoothly, in and out, though the urge to mindless thrust his hips is near impossible to resist. In between kisses he says, “Shixiong…Shixiong…” And then Shen Yuan throws his head back. “Shen Qingqiui!” he cries in triumph. “Yes! I remember! God, you feel so good, so good,” Shen Yuan babbles.

Shen Qingqiu has never felt anything like this happiness bubbling up in his chest and wishes this moment could last forever. He slows down and leans close so they’re nose to nose, breathing the same air. “A-Yuan.” He wants to say…

“Don’t *stop*,” Shen Yuan complains. “What is wrong with you-are *you* okay? Wait, do *you* need to stop because we can probably do that-”

A smile breaks across Shen Qingqiu’s face, wide and happy. He brushes a thumb tenderly over Shen Yuan’s cheek. “Just checking. Just making sure that *you* still wanted this.”

Shen Yuan gives him an answering smile, ocean eyes clear. “If it’s *you, if it’s Shen Shixiong, then it’s wonderful.”*

Without moving, Shen Qingqiu asks, “Are you in your right mind again?”

Glaring, Shen Yuan’s eyes go wide. “Am I-YES! For fuck’s sake if you don’t start *moving*.”

You’ll do what? Shen Qingqiu wants to know. So he arches and eyebrow, and keeps his hips still, while his length throbs inside Shen Yuan’s heat.

Shen Yuan smiles innocently, threads their fingers together and rolls them right over so he’s on top, eying Shen Qingqui in triumph.

“Go ahead,” Shen Qingqiu says with deep fondness. “A-Yuan should take what he wants.”

Somehow that makes a bright red flush start at Shen Yuan’s face and travel down to his chest. He leans forward and then back, and Shen Qingqiu wants to writhe on the bed. “Shixiong,” Shen Yuan says. “Again, *please*?”

Looking into his eyes, Shen Qingqiu says, “*A-Yuan*.” Then, feeling wicked, he plants his feet on the bed and snaps his hips up, pulling a cry from Shen Yuan. Shen Qingqiu reaches up, tugging Shen Yuan down so he’s speaking directly into his ear. “Call me A-Jiu. Only *you*. Only while we’re like *this*.”

Shen Qingqiu snaps his hips again, and Shen Yuan cries out. Reaching between them, Shen Qingqiu begins tugging on Shen Yuan’s erection.

“A-Jiu, *please*, don’t stop, don’t stop-” Shen Yuan chants, and then spills all over Shen Qingqiu’s fingers. “A-Jiu!” Shen Qingqiiu strokes him through the aftershocks, and with the

pulsing all around him combined with his own movements, his own orgasm breaks over him like a wave.

Shen Qingqiu squeezes his eyes shut when he comes, overwhelmed. Shen Yuan collapses on top of his chest, panting, and Shen Qingqiu eases them to the side so he can breathe a little better.

Shen Yuan suddenly stops breathing altogether, and for a doctor, you'd think he'd know about the importance of taking the next breath! "Breathe, please, A-Yuan," Shen Qingqiu says. Then a horrible thought occurs. "Are you…having second thoughts?"

"No!" Shen Yuan exclaims. And then stammers out that this was *his* first time.

Shocked, Shen Qingqiu says, "What do you mean?"

"I wanted to tell you," Shen Yuan says. "So many times." He rests his hand on Shen Qingqiu's chest, like he's feeling his heartbeat. "But I was…scared." He finishes on a sigh. "Shen Qingqiu…I wasn't always Mu Qingfang."

For once, time stops so Shen Qingqiu can process his gentle amusement. *This man!*. The caring physician who treated his qi deviation, then the wax for his hands. Yelling at Qi-ge. Protector of children, keeper of cute demonic plants. "Don't be afraid," he says softly. "I've known for a while."

Chapter End Notes

Forgive any typos I wanted to get this posted before A03 goes down again

Ehann: I am posting now

A03: Bitch you THOUGHT here have some random italics

Ehann: Those are not mine, I am LBH with the water chestnut cake

A03: I'll allow it THIS TIME

SQQ extra part 7 "The Lies we tell ourselves"

Chapter Summary

FYI: last night I posted a chapter 30! Make sure you read that one before this one!

I posted about half of this chapter as a threadfic on Twitter today while A03 was all *hand wavy* like that.

Chapter warning: Skinner demon stuff, lots of blood, and angst related to chapter 15.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A-Jiu, I hope that's true because there's one more secret I need to share with you.

My disciple is a WHAT? Shen Qingqiu thinks. Shen Yuan must be joking. Please, can he be joking?

"I was doing very well without this information, Mu Shidi," Shen Qingqiu points out. He runs
hand over his face.

"I-I know," Shen Yuan says. "But I couldn't just *not* tell you, not since we…" He swallows hard. "Yeah, I should-" Shen Yuan stands up and looks ready to bolt.

Shen Qingqiu swats him with his fan. "You should sit, *right the fuck down*," he snaps, fingers clenching around his fan. "No running away, A-Yuan. I can't believe *I'm* the one saying this but, just because I am rightfully annoyed to discover that you've known my most annoying disciple is *half heavenly* demon, this whole time." He eyes Shen Yuan, who still looks like he's going to flee. "I don't want you to leave," Shen Qingqiu says bluntly, since Shen Yuan seems determined to take his every blink as a bad sign. He leans back. "And I am *allowed* to be pissed off about this."

"Yes, A-Jiu," Shen Yuan agrees meekly. Too meekly. "Asking for forgiveness."

"Hmm. You know," Shen Qingqiu says, "I'm pretty sure that Shang Qinghua has a saying about that. Doesn't he." It is not a question.

It's better to ask forgiveness instead of permission the An Ding peak lord has muttered under his breath so many times, that pithy little saying has wormed its way all through the twelve peaks.

Shen Qingqiu needs to get out of the house, but he's definitely taking Shen Yuan with him. Shen Qingqiu feels like if he lets the other man out of his sight, he'll bury himself and work and hide. So he leads Shen Yuan through the bamboo forest toward his favorite spot on the cliffs. The bamboo makes a hollow kind of rustling sound as it moves with the wind, and it always feels restful here.

"You have your demonic plants," Shen Qingqiu says. "I have this forest. It…keeps me sane some days." He reaches out a hand, which Shen Yuan takes easily. "I want to show you something." The bamboo thins and they follow Shen Qinqiu's trail. The ground becomes rockier and the bamboo becomes sparse. He helps Shen Yuan climb some large rocks, and then they're looking out over the entire valley.

They sink down together on the rocks to watch the moon rise.

After awhile, Shen Yuan says, "Are you very angry with me?"

Sighing, Shen Qingqiu says, "I'm trying not to be, but it's difficult. I'll…get over it." His brows drop down and he has to ask, "Did you think I would hurt him?"

"A-Jiu, no! I was more worried about waiting," Shen Yuan confesses.

"What do you mean?" Shen Qingqiu asks.

And Shen Yuan explains that they've gotten close, and he wants to keep being close, but he was afraid if he waited any longer that Shen Qingqiu wouldn't be able to forgive him.

Shen Qingqiu thinks he better keep it to himself that he doesn't think there's *anything* A-Yuan could do, that he couldn't eventually forgive. "Look at me, A-Yuan," he says seriously. "I don't know much about relationships. I've spent most of my life alone." He furrows his brows. "There's things…" Things I will never be able to tell you. He shakes his head. "I had no idea I could even want…not until…" Shen Qinbgqiu swallows. "Until you."

Shen Yuan reaches out and wraps his arms around Shen Qingqiu's shoulders, drawing him close. He holds him tightly to his body murmuring, "I feel the same." Shen Qingqiu tightens his own arms around A-Yuan.

Shen Yuan kisses him then, and it's just as good. Shen Qingqiu falls into it, relishing the taste of him, the movement of his lips against his own, and the closeness. By the time they part, Shen Qingqiu isn't angry anymore.

For Shen Qingqiu, trying to return to his *normal* life is impossible. His thoughts are tangled up in Mu Qingfang, his A-Yuan. Shen Qingqiu has to force himself to think of him as Mu Shidi anymore, but he can't afford to make a mistake in front of anyone else. After all, who could possibly believe a tale of a banished god, who then ascended and called a displaced soul to fill his part?

Shen Qingqiu would have laughed mockingly, if he didn't know it was true.

One thing that's changed is that Shen Yuan still wants to spend time with him. Shen Qingqiu, having never been part of any romantic entanglements before, feels hopelessly under water about all this. He never knows if he's being too demanding, or not showing enough affection. Shen Yuan doesn't seem to mind when he just drops by, always looking at him with bright and happy eyes.

The first time Shen Qingqiu falls asleep in Shen Yuan's bed, it's unplanned. Shen Yuan had returned from one of his clinics, and wanted to lay down together. So Shen Qingqiu-feeling extremely domesticated and out of his depth-laid down beside Shen Yuan.

He faces away from Shen Yuan on his side, not because he wants to turn away, but it feels safer to have the other man at his back. One less side to worry about. He carefully scooches until his back is pressed up against Shen Yuan's warm side.

And Shen Qingqiu falls asleep just like that. He wakes in the middle of the night, not startled at all by the body next to him. Shen Yuan's arm rests over his waist, and his lips are pressed against the back of Shen Qingqiu's neck.

This must be heaven, he thinks faintly. He has the bizarre urge to stay awake just so he can enjoy the sensation of being held safely, but his body has other ideas and sinks right back into sleep.

Shen Qingqiu receives the mission to take his disciples to Shuang He city. He's not looking forward to it. From the information that Qi-ge gave him, it seems pretty clear there's a Skinner demon down there killing girls.

Fine. He supposes he will take his brats there and try to teach them some life skills, like how to not get killed on a night hunt. He will need to take special care with Yingying, he knows. For whatever reasons, she is a magnet for trouble. He sews some location arrays into an embroidery patch. It's disguised cleverly, he thinks, and instructs her to sew it into her under robes. For protection is the excuse he gives her, and Ning Yingying, guileless thing that she is, obeys.

And yes, he DOES double check, he's not an idiot. Shen Qingqiu already knows he has to take his little beast, Luo Binghe. Now that he knows the kid is half heavenly demon, he's even more grateful that he had that breakthrough. He really doesn't want to contemplate a *heavenly demon* coming back years in the future bent on revenge.

Anyway, the little brat has gained enough weight that he actually looks his age which Shen Qingqiu has discovered is somewhere between fourteen and fifteen. Unfortunately, Luo Binghe (much like himself) has no idea of his birthdate. It's fine.

In other news, Ming Fan finally seems to have gotten it through his head to leave Binghe alone. His little band of troublemakers was not so loyal when they realized they could and WOULD be dismissed from the sect with another infraction.

Seriously, Shen Qingqiu is not fucking around with them anymore. Just give him an excuse, and he'll fling them down the mountain himself. He'll accept Qi-ge's disappointed looks over Shen Yuan's any day. Not that either one of them needs to know that!

They descend the mountain, the disciples on horseback, and Shen Qingqiu riding in the carriage. He is perfectly able to ride horses, but why should he? There must be a few perks of being the peak lord!

Once they arrive at the town, Shen Qingqiu takes them directly to an Inn and secures rooms for them. He won't hear of Yingying sharing with a *boy* so she gets her own room. The rest of them can work out sleeping arrangements among themselves.

The next morning after everyone has had breakfast, Shen Qingqiu takes them to the Chen estate where they interview the Lord. He's a disgusting human being, most noblemen are, that's not a surprise. What *is* a surprise is the Skinner demon sitting right on his lap as they conduct the interview.

And none of his brats, not a single one of them, notices.

Fuming, Shen Qingqiu decides to let this play out. After they leave, he sends Luo Binghe and Ning Yingying to the local brothel to interview some of the ladies there. Ming Fan and his cronies interview some of the other locals to try and discover more about the other missing girls.

They'll find nothing of course. Demons can be clever, so a skinner demon especially would want to take girls that nobody would miss. Naturally, that would be the sex workers. Shen Qingqiu hopes that Yingying and Binghe pay enough attention to what the brothel girls tell them.

Shen Qingqiu spends the afternoon keeping track of Yingying via talisman and drinking tea in the outdoor seating area of the Inn.

That evening, the disciples return and tell Shen Qingqiu what they've learned. They gather around a large table in the eating area. Yingying and Binghe are more subdued than the others. Yingying especially was upset when she told him, "Shizun, the ladies say that when one of them disappears, nobody cares and no one *does* anything."

Luo Binghe frowns at the table. "Shizun…why would whoever is doing this need to take a girl every few weeks?"

Oh, Shen Qingqiu can think of lots of reasons, little beast and none of them are good! "Use your head, Luo Binghe. Think! Why *would* the killer do that?"

Looking horrified, Binghe says hesitantly, "Because he kills them?"

Shen Qingqiu takes a sip of tea, meeting the boy's eyes. "Likely, yes."

"But why would someone just keep killing?" Luo Binghe bursts out.

Does he really have to spoon feed them like this? Shen Qingqiu has failed as a teacher, clearly. “That would depend on the killer’s goal. Try to think of some motives. Once you have a good motive for the disappearances-what is the killer *doing* with the girls and why does he need *more* you have a better chance of finding them.”

To the surprise of no one, Ming Fan relates that he learned very little. In this case, it’s not *his* fault, but the fact that it’s not exactly high quality girls being snatched.

Shen Qingqiu sends them to bed, with the instructions to get a good nigh’ts sleep.Tomorrow he decides, he’ll put an end to this. He wants to sleep in his own (or Shen Yuan’s) bed. That’s another thing, he realizes. He didn’t truly understand how much he was going to miss Shen Yuan.

Sleeping is a lost cause so he meditates instead.At breakfast, Ning Yingying says, “Shizun can we go to the market this morning?”

Ming Fan looks at her incredulously, which Shen Qingqiu understands completely. He loves this girl like she’s his daughter, but that doesn’t make Shen Qingqiu blind to her faults. Still. He has a hard time saying no to her sometimes. He sighs deeply, and she smiles brightly.

Just for a moment he sees the little girl she used to be, in his mind,

“Take Luo Binghe with you,” He says. “You may go for half a sichen.” Shen Qingqiu leans forward and taps the table. “If you two are not back here at that time…” He narrows his eyes warningly.

“Thanking Shizun!” Yingying says happily, while Luo Binghe looks dubious. His expression is quite amusing and Shen Qingqiu wishes that A-Yuan was here to see it.

“Go then,” Shen Qingqiu says sharply. It’s the daytime, he tells himself, even as his instincts make the skin on the make of his neck crawl. Everything will be fine.

Except everything is very much NOT FUCKING FINE! Shen Qingqiu’s alarm talisman heats up, telling him that she’s gone beyond the acceptable amount of distance from Shen Qingqiu. He stands up. None of his idiot disciples are around, because of course.

People scurry out of his way as he storms down the street forming an array in his hand to pinpoint her location. Shen Qingqiu has to look twice at the location, and then he draws his sword.

Without care for the mortals around him, he leaps up to the rooftops and flies. Flies back to where they started with this whole entire mess.

To the Chen estate.

Shen Qingqiu kicks the doors in like Liu Qingge, ignoring the shouting and yelping that ensues. Hey, if it works for the brute, it will work for him! He demands to see Lord Chen and

is taken to a large office filled with furniture that is too big for this space and truly horrific decorations.

“Where is your concubine Die-er,” Shen Qingqiu demands, Xiu Ya in his hand, glowing brightly.

Lord Chen, not very bright, says stupidly, “Die-er? She disappeared last night! My Die-er is the latest victim of the monster that *you* were supposed to stop!”

“Are you trying to tell me that you had *no idea* that ‘Die-er’ was a demon?” Shen Qingqiu says this like he’s asking after tea. “Please, be more convincing.”

“Master Shen, are you *blaming* me?” Lord Chen protests.

Okay, you know what? Shen Qingqiu. Is DONE. Fucking around. He flashsteps forward, grabbing Lord Chen around the neck. Shen Qingqiu leans in, flexing his qi, allowing the murderous intent to fill the room. “She took. My. Disciples.” His fingers tighten for a moment that is too short, before he allows this pustule of a man to draw breath. “Where. Is. She.”

Miraculously, Lord Chen gives him directions to Die-er’s courtyard. Precious minutes wasting, Shen Qingqiu hurries there.

Again, he kicks the door straight in and strides through. Yingying and Binghe are tied with Immortal Binding cables. Binghe has been knocked out, and Die-er looms over Yingying with a hand full of talons extended.

Xiu Ya flies, directed only by his will and slices the demon's head off. A great spray of blood erupts from her neck, drenching both Yingying and Binghe, and splattering too much on Shen Qingqiu.

“Shizun!” Yingying shrieks loud enough to rouse the dead back to life and wriggles mightily in her bonds.

Shen Qingqiu is so relieved that he steps forward, slices the binding cables away, and hugs her tightly.

“Shizun, Shizun,” She cries into his blood robes. Her face is *covered* in blood.

Hastily, he produces a handkerchief and wipes her face. He flicks a spark of qi at Luo Binghe and the boy jerks awake. He looks down in disgust at his blood soaked robes, and then at the dead demon. “Shizun!” Luo Binghe flings himself at Shen Qingqiu and *also* holds on for dear life, *also* weeping like his life depended on it.

Shen Qingqiu is done. He’s done with this *day*, he’s done with these kids, and he is *so fucking done* with this mission.

He sends a qi message to Ming Fan, informing him that these Yingying and Binghe had gotten captured, he reduced them and was taking them to Qian Cao *immediately.*. He adds

that Ming Fang is to have the driver take the carriage back to Qing Jing peak, and that they should return now on horseback.

That taken care of, Shen Qingqiu gathers his disciples close, feeling like a mother hen. Once they've calmed down enough that they've both stopped weeping, he leads them outside. He directs Xiu Ya to float above the ground and steps onto her blade. He takes Yingyin in front of him and Luo Binghe behind him, holding on to his waist.

Ning Yingying presses her face against Shen Qingqiu's stomach and closes her eyes. "It's all right Ying-er," he tells her, and brushes a hand over her head. "I've got you."

Binghe squeezes hard around Shen Qingqiu's waist from the back and Shen Qingqiu awkwardly pats his hands.

He flies home with all haste feeling emotionally and spiritually drained. The children at least, are quiet. Shen Qingqiu hasn't attempted taking two passengers before and he really underestimated how taxing it was!

Two sichen later, he lands directly in front of the Healing Pavilion at Qian Cao. Taking each of his disciples by the arm, he tugs them inside, calling for assistance.

A senior disciple comes to help him. She blinks. They're all covered with blood so he really can't blame her.

"This disciple is Wei Xiuying, Shen Shibo. Please come with me." She leads them to an exam room, and has the kids sit on the exam table.

Shen Qingqiu crosses his arms over his chest. "Please call Mu Shidi to do the exams."

"But Shizun, it's really fine," Luo Binghe decides to mouth off.

"If I were you, Luo Binghe, I would certainly *keep my mouth shut*." Shen Qingqiu snarls.

Wei Xiuying opens her mouth and closes it again. "Shen Shibo, this disciple is perfectly capable of-"

"Disciple Wei," Shen Qingqiu says loudly, "Do you see that I am covered in *blood*? Do you see that my two disciples are *also* covered in blood. They have been held hostage by a *demon* that used Qi binding cables on them. Get Peak Lord Mu, NOW, before I call him *myself*."

Wei Xiuying goes pale and Mu Qingfang walks through the door at that precise moment.

Shen Qingqiu nearly collapses with relief. He has no idea if scanning Luo Binghe will show that he's part demon. He glares at Disciple Wei until she leaves the room.

"Shen Shixiong," Shen Yuan says, meeting his eyes. His gaze flickers over Shen Qingqiu's less than put together appearance before giving the kids a quick once over.

"Mu Shidi, finally," Shen Qingqiu says. "My idiot disciples *got captured by a Skinner demon* and *nearly died*. Please check them over while I report to Zhangmen Shixiong."

Shen Yuan doesn't look too bothered by all this and says mildly, "Of course. I will take care of it."

It's amazing how much better he feels just with a few words from Shen Yuan. "Thank you," he says, then gives his little brats one more glare before leaving.

He flies to his home on Qing Jing peak for a much needed bath and hair wash. Once that's done, Shen Qingqiu takes enormous pleasure in donning *clean* clothes. From there he gets *back* on his sword-he's never been so sick of flying in his *life* to meet with Qi-ge.

By now, Qi-ge's head disciple knows not to stop him and Shen Qingqiu walks right into Yue Qingyuan's office, where the sect leader is busy at his desk doing paperwork.

"Didi," Yue Qingyuan greets, and Shen Qingqiu doesn't even have the energy to fuss at that address.

"I nearly got my disciples killed this morning," Shen Qinghqiu says, and slumps forward, head in his hands.

"Surely it can't be?" Yue Qingyuan says after a moment. "What happened."

"I was so stupid," Shen Qingqiu says, sitting up straighter and rubbing a palm across his face. "Ying-er wanted to go to the market this morning, and *I let her*, even though there was a Skinner demon running about." He meets Yue Qingyuan's eyes. "If I had been even a few minutes later, it would have killed her and then Luo Binghe."

Yue Qingyuan blinks. "Didi, it sounds like you found them quite quickly."

Slumping in the chair, Shen Qingqiu stares bleakly at the ceiling. "I had her sew a tracking array into her clothes."

"Huh." Qi-ge sounds impressed.

"Don't be impressed," Shen Qingqiu says sharply. "Did you miss the part where she narrowly avoided death?"

"But she's alive, and I assume, as well as can be expected?" Yue Qingyuan ventures, clasping his hands together on his desk. "With Mu Shidi?"

"Yes," Shen Qingqiu says on a sigh. "I flew them both from Shuang He to Qian Cao peak." That elicits a frown. "Are you all right?" Yue Qingyuan asks in concern, but Shen Qingqiu just waves it away.

"I'm fine." Shen Qingqiu looks ahead blankly. He's never felt like such a failure. If Yingying had died….His stomach twists and he feels like vomiting. And then, he thinks, what if *Binghe* had gotten killed and it was Shen Qingqiu's fault?! Shen Yuan would never *speak* to him again!

Just realizing how *close* Shen Qingqiu came to utter and total *disaster* has left him badly shaken.

“How can I be a Peak Lord and make such an error?” He says this to himself, but Yue Qingyuan answers.

“You are not a failure,” Qi-ge says firmly. “If Mu Shidi were here he would say you were *human*. And that you did the best you could.”

“Did I though?” Shen Qingqiu asks rhetorically. “I knew, I *knew* something bad was going to happen on this mission. I knew it, and that’s why I prepared the array for Ying-er. I knew when she asked me to go to the market, but I stupidly thought, well, it’s early in the day, I’ll send another disciple with her, what could happen? But the entire time, I *knew*.”

“Liu Shidi has entered seclusion,” Yue Qingyuan remarks after a period of silence.

“Seclusion,” Shen Qingqiu echoes, frowning. “I feel like I could do with seclusion, right now,” he mutters.

“You could, of course,” Yue Qingyuan offers.

“I will consider it,” Shen Qingqiu says finally.

He returns to Qian Cao peak, and then goes with Shen Yuan to his home, where he lets his lover curl up around him. He sleeps but not well, and he wakes well before A-Yuan. He turns over, and watches him sleep for a long time.

I know what I have to do he thinks. *What happened down there in Shuang He can’t ever happen again. I have to make sure of it.*

The more he considers it, the more the idea seems good. Yes. A long seclusion to settle his mind. Perhaps he will even advance his cultivation another level, which would be nice. After all these years maybe he can catch up to his martial siblings.

But what to do about Shen Yuan?

Shen Qingqiu imagines telling him that he plans to enter the caves tomorrow. Imagines Shen Yuan being supportive. *Do what you need to do* he might say.

But his thoughts darken, and somehow he begins to wonder if Shen Yuan will even miss him? After all, Shen Qingqiu is often the one visiting Shen Yuan. Has Shen Qingqiu read too much into this?

Surely Shen Yuan will be fine. He has all of his strays to keep him occupied, not to mention being quite busy as a healer. The dark voice in his head also reminds Shen Qingqiu that in his entire life no one has ever really wanted him around.

Just when Shen Qingqiu thinks the day might never break, the room begins to lighten, and then Shen Yuan opens his eyes.

He looks at Shen Qingqiu and smiles, and it feels like the sunrise. “Hi,” Shen Yuan says.

“Good morning,” Shen Qingqiu replies easily, like he hasn’t been awake and miserable for most of the night. “Can’t we stay in bed today?” He’s not exactly serious, but oh, wouldn’t it be so nice? To cocoon themselves together all day?

“I would love that,” Shen Yuan says. “But we both have stuff to do. Sadly.”

Shen Qingqiu offers to let the healer check his meridians and Shen Yuan tells him, “No issues whatsoever.”

“Really?” Shen Qingqiu can’t help but asking.

Then Shen Yuan leans close, giving him a quick kiss on the lips and pressing their foreheads together. “Really. I hope today is a better day for you, A-Jiu.”

“It already is,” Shen Qingqiu says honestly. Any day that he gets to spend with you is a good one, he wants to say. Except the dark thoughts in his head linger. He’ll be fine, they whisper. He doesn’t need you, they say.

Before they leave for the day, Shen Qingqiu takes Shen Yuan’s arm and draws him close. “A-Yuan, wait a moment.” He lays a hand on Shen Yuan’s cheek and leans in, pressing a soft lingering kiss to his lips.

Shen Yuan hums happily, and deepens the kiss, licking into Shen Qingqiu’s mouth. *Don’t leave me* he thinks. *Please*.

After he pulls back, Shen Qingqiu says, “Shidi…” There’s so much he wants to say, and he has no idea if A-Yuan even wants to hear it. Shen Qingqiu has always been more trouble than he’s worth. “I’ll miss you.”

He turns and leaves because if he doesn’t he never will.

Shen Qingqiu finds Luo Binghe in the boy’s dorms recuperating. He’s the only disciple in there which suits his purposes just fine.

“Luo Binghe.” He says, and watches the boy startle.

“Shizun!” Binghe jolts in bed and looks like he’s ready to toss aside his covers to do Shen Qingqiu’s bidding.

“I am entering seclusion,” he tells Binghe. Their eyes meet. “I need you to do something for me.”

“Please say it, and this disciple will make sure it is done,” Luo Binghe says fervently.

This child. Shen Qingqiu sighs. “I need you to check on Mu Shishu. If you see or hear that…” He frowns. “If he’s not doing well, then…bake him something sweet and take it to him.” He means to leave but adds, “He’s partial to water chestnut cakes.”

Luo Binghe looks like he has many questions and Shen Qingqiu is going to answer exactly NONE of them. “You will do this for me,” he says severely, and Luo Binghe bows the best he can while in bed. He heads for the doorway but Luo Binghe calls out.

“Shizun-how long will you be gone?”

Head tilted to the side, Shen Qingqiu answers softly. “Three years, or close enough.” He turns to Binghe once more. “Study hard…and check on Mu Shishu. Remember, Binghe,” he says finally.

Yue Qingyuan meets him at the entrance to the Ling Xi Caves. “Are you sure about this?” He looks conflicted. “He’s going to be upset. Upset and *very* angry.” Qi-ge snorts. “You haven’t yet had the pleasure of Mu Shidi yelling at you, but I fear it’s very much in your future.”

Snorting, Shen Qingqiu crosses his arms over his chest. “Just let me in, Qi-ge.”

The sect leader lowers the barrier, and Shen Qingqiu enters the caves. It will be fine, he thinks, and the skin on the back of his neck *crawls*.

Chapter End Notes

YQY: I am not taking the blame for this one

SQQ: Shut up and let me in the caves

Also SQQ: I have a bad feeling about this

Come and tell me what you think! I hope this makes it a little clearer that SQQ was not like, super reliable about this decision. There was a lot of faulty thinking on his part.

SQQ extra part 8. "I fucked up so bad"

Chapter Summary

This Extra takes place during chapter 16.

Chapter warnings, canon typical violence, depression

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The mountain shakes, rousing Shen Qingqiu from his meditation. He eyes Liu Qingge carefully, since the last time the caves started shaking, Liu Qingge was deviating and punching the walls.

Shen Qingqiu feels rather proud of himself that he managed to treat Liu Shidi's deviation without falling into one himself.

Liu Shidi has been meditating quietly across the cave ever since.

But now, something has gone terribly wrong, he knows. Shen Qingqiu straightens his robes, and calls over to his martial brother, "Shidi, wake up, we need to go out, now."

Opening his eyes, Liu Qingge meets his gaze. "What's wrong?" The War God rises smoothly to his feet. He quickly shrugs on his outer robe, stained with his own blood from the recent qi deviation.

"I don't know yet," Shen Qingqiu tells him. "But we are surely needed, urgently."

For once, Liu Qingge doesn't argue with him. He holds out a hand, manifesting Cheng Luan directly into his grip. He gives Shen Qingqiu a sharp nod, and together they leave the Ling Xi caves.

Immediately, Shen Qingqiu sees the plumes of black smoke rising from Qiong Ding peak. He frowns. It looks close to one of the main areas, possibly not far from the white staircase that leads down the mountain.

He applies a stealth talisman and offers one to Liu Shidi, who merely looks offended. "Fine, have it your way, brute. Go on and be very seen. I will provide cover for you."

Liu Qingge meets his eyes again. He says simply, "Fine."

Okay? Shen Qingqiu is starting to appreciate this new and improved version of his most annoying martial brother. They both take to their swords, flying directly to where most of the

screaming is coming from.

Qiong Ding peak, being the tallest of all the twelve peaks, has many, many hills and valleys of its own. While the most populated areas are right in the middle. The Ling Xi caves, where they are coming from, are in the back of Qiong Ding. The rainbow bridge connection to Shen Qingqiu's peak is on the opposite side of Qiong Ding.

Liu Qingge swoops down suddenly, leaping off his sword, slaughtering a demon which seems to have horns and a long tail, but otherwise appeared human-like. He locates Shen Qingqiu and says unnecessarily, "Demons."

"Yes, Shidi, I have *eyes*," Shen Qingqiu says. "We need to move!"

The screams get louder, and then a disciple in green and white comes running up the path, two demons in pursuit. Shen Qingqiu calls leaves from the nearby trees, uses his qi to make them razor sharp, and eviscerates them both.

The disciple, a rather tall young woman- Shen Qingqiu blinks. "...Yingying?"

"Shizun!" She shrieks and runs forward right into his arms. Shen Qingqiu wraps his arms around her, giving her a quick hug.

"Ying-er," Shen Qingqiu says, a little lost. "You're so grown up!"

"Shizun, Luo Shidi and all the other disciples of Qiong Ding peak are fighting demons! They came to steal the plaque from Qiong Ding peak, but we will not let them!"

Liu Qingge, having landed close by to listen, abruptly snaps his head around in the direction of shouting. "I'm going," he says and speeds off.

"Ying-er, come on." Shen Qingqiu takes her behind him on his sword and follows Liu Qingge.

When they reach the middle of the peak, they find chaos. Disciples and hallmasters alike are all fighting demons. Shen Qingqiu sees what looks like a demoness from the Sha clan- dressed in nothing but red ribbons, using her teeth and claws to kill, yeah. He's sure. But there's so many others.

"Has anyone lit an emergency beacon?" Shen Qingqiu asks

"None of us had flares, Shizun, but they destroyed the rainbow bridges," Ning Yingying tells him, clutching his shoulders.

"Do you have your sword?" He demands.

"Yes, Shizun," she says grimly.

Shen Qingqiu brings them to the ground and she steps off his sword. "Look at me." He waits until he has her full attention. "You fight to *kill*. Fight *dirty*, because you're not sparring with your shixiong, these demons will kill you." His eyes burn into hers. "*Don't* let them."

She nods, and then ducks under a spear thrown from somewhere. Ahead of them there's three dead Qiong Ding disciples on the ground.

And then a bunch of demons walk through a distance shortening array into Qiong Ding peak and there's no more time for advice. It's time to fight and survive, or die.

Shen Qingqiu slaughters his way to the middle of the peak, leaving bodies behind him, most of them bleeding out. He uses sword seals to send Xiu Ya far out ahead of him, while using leaves and blades of grass to slice throats of those that approach him.

He is grimly focused on his task. Slice. Kill. Dodge. Duck. A silver blur blocks a small projectile that Shen Qingqiu missed, and suddenly there's a tall disciple in green and white in front of him. Brows furrowed, Shen Qingqiu stares at this young man. *Who the fuck?*

"Shizun!" The young man cries, and flashsteps close enough to *hug* him!

Oh dear *gods*, this is Luo Binghe! Resisting the urge to sigh at his troublesome brat, Shen Qingqiu cuffs him on the back of the head. "Stop *hugging* me and go kill some demons," Shen Qingqiu roars, annoyed. "Little beast have all these years without me addled your brain?"

"Yes, Shizun!" Luo Binghe cries happily, and then he's jumping back into the battle, sword flashing.

There's too many injured kids around here, Shen Qingqiu notices. He hopes that someone has notified Qian Cao, so Mu Shidi-

He takes a breath.

Mu Qingfang.

Shen Yuan.

No, Shen Qingqiu can't do that right now. He's somehow got to keep as many kids alive as he can. He starts rescuing disciples that are about to get killed, dispatching the demon, and then shoving the wounded behind him.

He loses track of time.

Somehow he ends up back to back with Liu Qingge of all people, fighting like they've been fighting in tandem for years. Interestingly, now that Shen Qingqiu has saved the brute's life, and perhaps with their prolonged exposure to each other, he finds it rather easy to anticipate Liu Shidi's moves.

Gradually, they turn the tide, and thank the fucking Gods, other peak lords *finally* start showing up. It sure would be nice if *Yue Qingyuan* over powered bastard that he is, was here on his own damned peak!

Qi Qingqi comes in like a shooting star, so fast she warps the air around her and makes a gigantic BOOM in her wake. She skids to a stop and doesn't waste any time, decapitating the

first demon she comes across, and then flicking the blood from her blade coldly. She doesn't stop there, picking the largest demon near her and attacking them.

With her come the disciples of Xian Shu peak, all the ones who have earned a sword at least. Shen Qingqiu has never actually seen them fight outside of a spar but they are quite deadly. This peak is adept in spiritual and physical cultivation so the Xian Shu disciples are whipping out talismans as well as slicing throats.

Good.

Yu Qingxin arrives next, riding a large winged tiger. The Ling Yu peak lord steps off his mount and the tiger folds his wings and leaps at a demon, tearing out its throat.

With the arrival of Yu Qingxin, the local animals are called into service. Small rodents attack and bite ankles, distracting demons from their human targets, allowing for easier kills. From the sky, several small hawks dive down and attack from the air, crying their triumph when they take eyes, or in some cases, lift smaller demons up with their talons, and drop them over the side of the mountain.

Large cats appear from nowhere, local mountain cats, but also whatever pet cats might be in earshot of the Beast Peaklord's request for help. The cats quickly form packs, and together are quite capable of taking down prey much larger than them.

Shen Qingqiu quickly sees that he needs to provide protection for Yu Qingxin while he is communicating with so many animals at once. The Ling Yu peak lord is nearly killed before Shen Qingqiu releases what's happening and moves at once to watch his periphery.

Liu Shidi produces his ridiculous array that sends copies of his overly large sword everywhere, finishing off most of the remaining demons, and then chasing the ones that flee down the mountain.

Losing track of all time, it feels like forever until all the demons are very much *dead*. When the fighting is finally done, Liu Qingge and Qi Qingge approach where Shen Qingqiu and Yu Qingxin are standing.

"Are you all okay?" Liu Qingge asks, while Qi Qingqi eyes Shen Qingqiu.

"Why were you just standing around, Shen Qingqiu?" She demands.

Ah. Well, this is familiar. Shen Qingqiu looks icily at her, preparing himself for more vitriol. However, defense comes from a very unexpected place.

"He was killing demons way before you got here," Liu Qingge says.

And then Yu Qingxin adds, "Shen Shixiong was defending me while I coordinated the animals. The local animals are much harder to speak to and control, rather than our spirit beasts which have been bred for generations to work with humans." He actually bows to Shen Qingqiu, who is startled. "My thanks."

Qi Qingqi gives Shen Qingqiu a suspicious glance then sniffs. "Fine."

“Has anyone seen Mu Shixiong?” Yu Qingxin asks.

“I will go look for him,” Shen Qingqiu says, and leaves to do just that. He walks toward the side of Qiong Ding where the rainbow bridge should be. The fact that it’s not there looks so very, very strange.

And then he sees a familiar figure kneeling on the ground, treating a young man with severe burns. “Mu Shidi,” Shen Qingqiu says.

Shen Yuan stands up and turns. When his eyes fall upon Shen Qingqiu he *flinches*.

Shen Qingqiu feels like the world is crashing down on him. Shen Yuan looks *awful*.

“Shen Shixiong,” Shen Yuan says calmly. “Are you injured?” His hands are covered in blood and his eyes are distant.

Frowning, Shen Qingqiu says, “No, but-”

“I’m afraid it will have to wait, Shixiong,” Shen Yuan says, voice utterly devoid of any emotion. He returns his attention to his patient, clearly dismissing Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Qingqiu stares at his back for a few long seconds. His mind, now exquisitely clear, is beginning to understand just how much he’s fucked everything up.

Before his seclusion, he told himself Shen Yuan might not even miss him. That Shen Yuan would be fine.

The man currently wearing Shen Yuan’s skin is not fine. Not even close. He’s alarmingly thin and pale, with great dark circles under his eyes, and the lines of his cheekbones clearly evident. He looks…empty.

And Shen Qingqiu did that. Shen Qingqiu did that by entering seclusion and not telling Shen Yuan.

How?? Shen Qingqiu wracks his brain. *How did I think that was okay?* He would love nothing more than to go back in time and wring his own neck. He continues to mentally castigate himself while attempting to round up his disciples. Why were they even *on* this peak? There was no guarantee that he was going to exit seclusion today!

The air whistles, and there’s another large BOOM. Shen Qingqiu tenses up, sword appearing in his hand.

Just then, Yue Qingyuan drops out of the sky landing in a great cloud of dust, Xuan Su’s sheath in his hand. He looks around at the carnage: dead demons *everywhere*, so many injured people…so many dead disciples.

There’s an emergent peak lord meeting of course. When Shen Qingqiu enters, Shen Yuan is already at his usual seat to Shen Qingqiu’s right. Shen Yuan doesn’t look up when Shen

Qingqiu takes his seat, the other peak lord is occupied trying to get his still bloodstained hands clean.

Shen Qingqiu finds a clean handkerchief and passes it within Shen Yuan's field of vision.

"Hey thanks," Shen Yuan says, turning to the left and meeting Shen Qingqiu's eyes. Again, A-Yuan has a particularly blank expression. His gaze darts away. "Thank you," Shen Yuan says more distantly.

Then Liu Qingge storms in, slamming his body into his chair. "How the hell did demons invade the sect?" he demands.

Shen Qingqiu remains quiet. He hasn't been around, has he? While he listens to the reports from the other peak lords, Shen Yuan starts treating Qi Qingqi's hands. It's terrible, but Shen Qingqiu doesn't care about anything else except Shen Yuan right now.

The sect can go fuck itself, he has no desire to speak to Yue Qingyuan, either! Why the hell did it take him so long to get back? He knows realistically that Qi-ge had no way of knowing the sect was going to be invaded. Still.

At the end of the day, there's probably no one to blame for this.

When the meeting is over, Shen Yuan escapes quickly. Resigned, Shen Qingqiu finds himself caught in a conversation with Shang Qinghua of all people.

"Shen Shixiong?" Shang Qinghua asks hesitantly.

"What is it?" Shen Qingqiu says impatiently. He really needs to go to Qian Cao peak.

Wringing his hands, Shang Qinghua says, "Hey so, I don't know if you've noticed but um. Mu Shidi's not doing great."

THAT gets one hundred percent of his attention *immediately*. "What's happened?" Shen Qingqiu demands.

But Shang Shidi just blinks at him. "What hap--" His eyes go wide, and then Shang Shidi is actively *glaring* at him. "*What happened* is that you left him! You couldn't even bother to *tell* him?" Shang Qinghua doesn't look away from Shen Qingqiu's eyes. "Shixiong, that was….really scummy." Shang Qinghua doesn't wait for a response, but turns on his heel to leave and is immediately dragged into conversation with the sect leader.

Fine. He's not wrong, anyway. Stupid, stupid, Shen Qingqiu tells himself. He leaves the pavilion and no sooner does he get outside then Liu Shidi stomps up to him.

"Mu Shidi just yelled at *me*!" Liu Qingge says angrily. "You know what he said when I asked why he looked so bad?"

Shen Qingqiu can imagine. He makes a gesture with his hands as if to say, give it to me.

“He said, *because some of us have been working everyday and didn’t just fuck off to cultivate without telling anyone*!”

It’s honestly hard to tell if Liu Shidi is annoyed on Mu Shidi’s behalf, or just pissed off that he got yelled at instead of Shen Qingqiu. He can’t even defend himself. “I know,” Shen Qingqiu says heavily.

Liu Qingge presses his lips together. “I thought you two were-” He makes a vague hand gesture that Shen Qingqiu interprets to mean ‘together’.

Shen Qingqiu sighs. “We are…it’s just…” He shakes his head. “I will make things right,” he says, looking Liu Qingge in the eyes.

Liu Shidi looks surprised that Shen Qingqiu isn’t protesting more. “See that you do,” he says.

He flies to Qian Cao peak and walks to Shen Yuan’s home. No one answers his knock, so he lets himself in. After they had returned from the Spider cow mission, Shen Yuan had keyed Shen Qingqiu into his wards.

They still allow him through.

There’s a layer of dust everywhere like Shen Yuan couldn’t be bothered with any cleaning. Shen Qingqiu finds a rag and starts wiping things down. He makes tea and waits.

After dusk has long fallen, Shen Yuan returns. His steps are heavy and slow. He pulls out a chair at the table and slumps into it, leaning over and resting his head into his hands.

“You look terrible,” Shen Qingqiu says softly.

Shen Yuan’s head snaps up, and in disbelief he turns to see Shen Qingqiu standing in his kitchen. “Shen Shixiong.” His voice is flat and dull.

Shen Qingqiu comes over to the table, and sits down at his (former) usual place. He keeps his eyes on Shen Yuan’s face while he says, “A-Yuan.”

For a moment, Shen Yuan’s face crumples, and then he wipes away all expression so fast that Shen Qingqiu nearly can’t believe his eyes.

Standing up, Shen Yuan does not meet his eyes. “I’m going to bed,” he announces to the room. “You can stay. Or go.” And he walks toward his bedroom.

Sharpening his hearing with qi, Shen Qingqiu closes his eyes and listens to A-Yuan go through the motions of getting ready for bed. It’s when he hears the little hitch in Shen Yuan’s breathing that Shen Qingqiu tightens his jaw, and walks back to join him.

The bedroom is very dark, and A-Yuan is a lump in the bed, facing away from the doorway. “A-Yuan…Can I?” He won’t stay without A-Yuan’s verbal consent.

Shen Yuan takes some shuddering breaths. Shen Qingqiu thinks of that time in the alley, before the Spider cow mission went to hell, the way he’d tried to hide his pain from Shen

Qingqiu.

“Yeah,” Shen Yuan says finally, voice thick with tears.

Removing his outer robes and hair piece, Shen Qingqiu climbs into the bed, facing Shen Yuan. He reaches out and oh so gently wipes the tears from Shen Yuan’s face. They continue leaking steadily.

It’s horrible, and it’s Shen Qingqiu’s fault. All he had to do was *talk* to Shen Yuan. That’s *it*. “I’m *sorry*,” Shen Qingqiu says, anguished and meaning every single word. “I didn’t think-”

“No shit,” Shen Yuan says. “That part came through loud and clear. Do you even…? I’m trying to sleep.”

“...Can I hold you?” Shen Qingqiu’s voice is very small, and to be honest he’s expecting to be rejected.

Shen Yuan thinks about it while tears leak from his closed eyes. “Okay…A-Jiu,” he whispers, and Shen Qingqiu lets out a deep breath.

Carefully, he gathers Shen Yuan into his arms, and A-Yuan presses his cheek into Shen Qingqiu’s chest. Shen Qingqiu rubs his face into Shen Yuan’s hair, still smelling of smoke and blood. He kisses his head, and holds Shen Yuan securely.

I love you. I love you.

The words echo in Shen Qingqiu’s mind, but he lacks the courage to speak them.

I’m so sorry

Chapter End Notes

SQH: You fucked up bad

LQG: You fucked up bad.

MQF: You fucked up bad.

SQQ: I fucked up so bad.

I took some liberties with the demon invasion!! Everyone always rewrites it very similar to canon but I wanted to get a different flavor with a lot more general destruction and mayhem. It also seemed weird to me that no other peak lords tried to help out in the book.

Please come tell me what you think!! Your comments are my life blood!!

SQQ Extra part 9 "Reconciliation"

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: FLUFF

These events take place in chapter 17-18.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The ink in the inkstone is all dried out, and the table littered with ash from where Shen Qingqiu immolated his last attempts at a letter. He's tried and failed several times already, to put his thoughts to paper.

Nothing is good enough.

This is the second day of working at it, and he's going to keep going until he gets it right. Shen Qingqiu sits at his desk, peak lord paperwork standing in neglected stacks that grow taller every day. He's made it clear to his peak that he's not to be disturbed, so naturally, someone knocks at the door.

"Shizun?" Luo Binghe calls from the porch and then walks right in.

Sighing heavily, Shen Qingqiu lays down the brush. "Back in the office."

In moments, Luo Binghe appears in the doorway. Shen Qingqiu is still getting used to this young man being so…*large*. Somehow while Shen Qingqiu was away, Binghe grew to be almost the same height as himself! And what's more, the little brat was *wide*, packed with muscle.

With effort, Shen Qingqiu puts aside his annoyance. Maybe it's good the brat showed up. His presence alone gives Shen Qingqiu an idea. "Binghe, I need your help this afternoon."

Eyes wide, Luo Binghe says cautiously, "Does Shizun not recall that-"

Waving a hand, Shen Qingqiu says dismissively, "Yes, I know you're part demon, I've known that for *years*, and you're still an annoying little beast most of the time."

Because Luo Binghe has never been a normal person, he looks absolutely thrilled with Shen Qingqiu's words. "Thanking Shizun! This disciple will endeavor-"

"I need to make some water chestnut cakes," Shen Qingqiu interrupts, because Luo Binghe can go on for a long time when he feels the need to.

Luo Binghe blinks. “Those are…for Mu Shishu?” He frowns.

“What? Those are his favorites,” Shen Qingqiu says.

“Oh, yes, I know.” Binghe presses his lips together for a moment then adds, “It’s just…I had to stop making them for him, because…well, it made him sad.” He meets Shen Qingqiu’s eyes. “It made Mu Shishu *cry*, Shizun.” His tone is reproachful.

Shen Qingqiu runs a palm over his face. “Fuck. Still, I need to make some today, and you will help me.”

“Does Shizun really not mind-” Luo Binghe is apparently still on about his demon blood.

“Did you choose to be born to a demon?” Shen Qingqiu demands. He wants to put this conversation to rest forever, and frankly he has *much* more important things on his mind.

“No, but-”

“I am the Peak Lord, and *I* don’t see the issue. You *are* still a member of Qing Jing peak, yes?”

“Yes, Shizun!” Binghe exclaims.

Shen Qingqiu huffs. “That’s settled then.” His eyes meet Luo Binghe’s. “This afternoon, Binghe. You will teach me how to make those cakes for Mu Qingfang.”

“Are you working on an apology letter?” Luo Binghe asks.

Okay, who raised this kid? Shen Qingqiu narrows his eyes. “That sounds like Binghe is asking for punishment.”

To his surprise, Luo Binghe lifts his chin, defiant. “Shizun may punish this disciple as he sees fit, but he should know how much damage he did.” He sits down in the chair opposite Shen Qingqiu’s desk. “The first day this disciple delivered treats to Mu Shishu, he had not been seen on his peak for days, and was refusing all visitors. He refused to answer the door after many minutes of knocking, and when he answered…Shizun, it-he wasn’t doing well.”

Shen Qingqiu knows. He *knows*. He can’t even be annoyed with his brat disciple, since he’s only looking out for Shen Yuan. “I have much to make up for.”

Luo Binghe peers at him, searching his face. He must find whatever he’s looking for because he nods. “All right. I will teach Shizun how to make cakes for Mu Shishu.” He stands up, and bows, taking his leave.

Shen Qingqiu returns his attention to the letter he needs to write. His inkstone is dry, and he cleans it with qi, before beginning to grind more ink. He *was* telling Binghe the truth, though. He does have much to make up for. He can’t help replaying that last conversation with Shen Yuan in his head, where everything went so wrong.

I …told myself you would be fine, that we have no formal relationship

Mu Shidi has had many people in his bed.

The betrayal and *hurt* on A-Yuan's face. *I can't believe you made me fall in love with you. I hate being so fucking stupid.*

Shen Qingqiu's soul tried to leave his body with those words. *I didn't know* he'd said, like that excused anything.

You know what? The next time you try to give me an explanation, maybe write a fucking letter. Because right now, I don't see how you're treating me any better than Yue Qingyuan treated you for all those years.

Shen Qingqiu supposes he's not wrong, but, that comparison *stings*.

Leaning his head on one propped hand, Shen Qingqiu contemplates his ink morosely. Just because Shen Yuan said that he *loved* him, past tense, was no guarantee that he continued to do so. But. He's already let the worst of his insecurities drive him to be cruel to Shen Yuan.

He refuses to do so again. No, he has to strip himself bare and let Shen Yuan judge for himself. He deserves a full explanation. Shen Qingqiu dips his brush into the ink and begins.

After nearly a half sichen, he's confident he has the final version. Rolling the sheets of paper together, Shen Qingqiu ties them with a piece of ribbon. He lights a talisman, sending for Luo Binghe.

First, they need water chestnut flour, so the dried water chestnuts must be ground in a mill until the resulting product is fine enough to use. Once they have the proper amount of flour, they add a little amount of water, stirring until smooth.

Next, they melt sugar and water over a low flame. Once it comes to a boil, they add minced water chestnuts in. They use a metal pan and pour the flour mixture and sugar mixture together.

Unfortunately, Shen Qingqiu is not fast enough, and the dough becomes too hard and lumpy for use.

Luo Binghe sighs, and offers to fly to Zui Xian peak to get more water chestnuts. He seems to take some sort of pity on Shen Qingqiu saying, "Don't take it too hard, Shizun, you can't be good at *everything*."

Shen Qingqiu would like to say he got something productive done while he waits for Binghe to return, but the truth is, he doesn't. Instead he lays on his bed and thinks about all the things he *should* have said to A-Yuan, and all the things he wishes he *didn't* say.

Once Binghe returns, they repeat the process again. Shen Qingqiu once more skirts the edge of disaster, until Luo Binghe swipes the mixing spoon *right out of his hands*-this BRAT- and

somehow manages to save the batter.

It's gotten late and Luo Binghe tells Shen Qingqiu that he only needs to let the batter steam for 20 minutes and then remove it from the heat. He says this like Shen Qingqiu is a child that needs hand holding, and he bristles.

Luo Binghe holds up his hands. "Shizun asked for this one's help, so this one is only following Shizun's instructions."

The final product is, well. It's not perfect. There *were* still lumps in the batter, and he *may* have left it on the steamer for several minutes too long. The resulting water chestnut cakes are a little darker than they should be, definitely not smooth and slightly burnt at the edges.

Looking down at them in dismay, Shen Qingqiu slices a tiny piece off one edge and tastes it. Surprisingly, *thankfully*, the taste is still very good, and he sighs in relief.

The next morning, he wraps the cakes up in a box, tucking his rolled up letter in there as well. Luo Binghe comes to the bamboo house and Shen Qingqiu meets him on the porch. "Take these to Mu Qingfang please."

Blinking slowly, Luo Binghe says, "Shizun are you sure you don't want to take them yours-"

"No!" Shen Qingqiu says too sharply. He modulates his voice and adds, "No, it's better that you take them. He's always liked you." He meets Binghe's eyes. "You should know that Mu Shishu doesn't care you're part demon either."

Eyes widening, Luo Binghe says, "Shishu knows *too*?"

"Yes, and he's fine with it, so go take him this package." Shen Qingqiu crosses his arms over his chest.

Luo Binghe lifts a corner of the box and peeks inside. He looks at Shen Qingqiu judgmentally.

"*Don't* say it," Shen Qingqiu warns.

"You left them on too long!" Luo Binghe says accusingly.

"I have a lot on my mind!" Shen Qingqiu shouts, and finally Luo Binghe subsides.

"Fine." This disrespectful brat says right to his face, and then flounces off.

Shen Qingqiu closes the door and takes a few deep breaths.

This Qingqiu begs for the opportunity to Show Shen Yuan his steadfastness, a chance to make up for the pain his actions have caused. If it pleases Shen Yuan, then wherever and wherever is convenient, this Qingqiu would gladly meet.

He's not expecting anything from Shen Yuan and certainly not *today*. If Shen Qingqiu is lucky, maybe he'll hear something from A-Yuan within the next couple of days. With that

thought in mind, he forces himself to leave the house, and go for a walk.

He just gets to the cliffs when the talisman alerting him that someone is at the bamboo house goes off. Shen Qingqiu, startled and filled with hope, nearly chokes on his own saliva. He leaps into the air, calling Xiu Ya and flies back home.

Shen Qingqiu lands with his heart in his throat. Shen Yuan turns around and stops in his tracks when he sees Shen Qingqiu at the bottom of the steps. Mindful of Shen Yuan's order to stop using his name, he says, "Mu Shidi, I. I wasn't expecting you." But it's *so* good to see your face, he thinks.

Shen Yuan frowns and says, "I can come back if this time is not-"

"No!" Shen Qingqiu presses his lips together. "Now..is good." He ascends the stairs, meeting Shen Yuan's ocean eyes the entire time. "Please, come in." He opens the door, and Shen Yuan enters ahead of him.

Shen Yuan moves to the table and sits, and after a moment, Shen Qingqiu decides to sit right next to him. Shen Yuan actually meets his eyes which feels significant.

"You read my letter," Shen Qingqiu broaches carefully. To prevent himself from reaching out, he forces his hands down to his knees. He clenches his robes.

"Yes. I…it helped," Shen Yuan says.

"Mu Shidi…I meant everything I wrote." He extends a hand, but hastily retracts it. Shen Qingqiu swallows. Everything feels so hesitant. He can't assume. He needs to *ask*."Can I… hold your hand?"

Shen Yuan nods slowly, and reaches out. Shen Qingqiu reaches back so they're palm to palm, and threads their fingers together.

Shen Qingqiu starts talking, telling Shen Yuan every single shameful thing about himself. He was a slave, abandoned at birth. Left behind by his only friend. "How would I know how to handle getting everything I never even knew to wish for?" He looks directly into Shen Yuan's eyes. "I should have told you about my intentions to enter the caves. My…insecurity…led me to hurt you and I *deeply* regret that." He leans over until his forehead touches Shen Yuan's hand.

Something brushes over his hair. "Shixiong," Shen Yuan says softly. "Would you make us some tea?"

Straightening up, Shen Qingqiu blinks in surprise. "Of. Of course."

He's not sure why he's making tea, but maybe Shen Yuan wants some space to think? He's just putting the talisman on the teapot when Shen Yuan follows him into the kitchen and then embraces him from behind.

“I missed you so much,” Shen Yuan whispers, arms wrapping around Shen Qingqiu’s waist.

Shen Qingqiu closes his eyes in relief and lays his hand on top of Shen Yuan’s. He turns in place, and hugs Shen Yuan properly. “Mu Shidi-” he starts, but Shen Yuan interrupts.

“Say my *name*,” Shen Yuan entreats him.

Oh, he’s…“Shen Yuan. A-Yuan. *Beloved*.”

Chapter End Notes

I know! I know! I skipped over some angst! I don't actually love writing it, and it was making me sad, so Fastforward!

LBH: *grimly* These cakes are getting made no matter HOW many times it takes. Shizun, don't screw this up.

SQQ: *screws it up*

LBH: *peeks in the box* I am not taking the blame for these.

LBH extra #1

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: none I can think of!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Do *not* embarrass me," Shen Qingqiu says, looking straight ahead while they walk over the bridge to Bai Zhan peak.

Luo Binghe would like to be able to agree, except for some reason, Shizun seems to find most things Luo Binghe does to be embarrassing. To quote Mu Shishu, *that's a him problem*.

Luo Binghe did not *ask* for extra lessons from Liu Shishu, and he certainly doesn't *want* them. But Shizun was clear, and so here they are. Shizun said earlier that he'd already worked things out with Liu Qingge, so Binghe isn't sure why Shen Qingqiu is *personally* taking him to the peak next door.

On the Bai Zhan side of the bridge, Liu Shishu is waiting for them. Luo Binghe hasn't seen his martial uncle since the demon invasion about a month ago, and before that it's been several years.

Up close, the Bai Zhan war god is just a little taller than Luo Binghe. Liu Qingge's hair is pulled back into a high ponytail and the sleek shining length flows down his back like an inky river. Luo Binghe remembers that Liu Shishu was very handsome but…he's never been this close to the other man before. It's odd.

"Liu Shidi," Shen Qingqiu says gravely, "This is Luo Binghe."

Grey eyes flick over Binghe dismissively, and Luo Binghe bristles. "I remember, from the disciple selection. You stole him from me," Liu Qingge says, glaring at Shen Qingqiu.

Excuse me, *what*? Binghe thinks. He had no idea that Liu Shishu had wanted him for a disciple.

Shen Qingqiu snorts. "Hardly. He had too much potential to be wasted on a peak full of *brutes*."

Um, Shizun, Luo Binghe's not sure this is the best way to go about-

"And yet here you are, begging for favors," Liu Qingge says, narrowing his eyes at Shizun.

With an eye roll, Shen Qingqiu says, “Remind me who saved who’s life again, Shidi?” He smiles spitefully. “You owe me, and this is what I want. *He’s* a physical cultivator,” Shen Qingqiu says, gesturing at Luo Binghe. “He’s adept at spiritual techniques, somehow, but his potential is too vast to go untrained by a *specialist*.” He prods Liu Qingge in the chest with a closed fan, and Liu Qingge smacks it away, annoyed.

“Fine,” Liu Qingge snaps. “Boy, come here.”

Luo Binghe can’t quite keep the annoyance off his face. He glances at Shen Qingqiu, who nods, so Binghe walks over to Liu Shishu. He bows. “This Luo Binghe greets Liu Shishu.”

“Whatever,” Liu Qinnge says, “Come with me.” He turns and starts walking.

“What are you waiting for?” Shen Qingqiu demands. “*Go* little beast, and don’t shame Qing Jing peak.”

“Yes, Shizun,” Luo Binghe says resentfully, and trots after Liu Qingge. He catches up to him easily, and follows the Bai Zhan peak lord to the lower training grounds. There’s already a bunch of Bai Zhan disciples there sparring.

“You,” Liu Qingge points at one of the Bai Zhan boys. He jerks his head at Luo Binghe. “Spar with him while I watch.” To Binghe he says, “Get in the ring.”

Luo Binghe grits his teeth. “Yes, Shishu,” he says. He draws his sword Zheng Yang and walks into the ring. One of the disciples exiting slams hard into Binghe’s shoulder on purpose. Luo Binghe doesn’t react. He had worse than that on Qing Jing on days when he barely had enough strength to *stand*. Loser.

The Bai Zhan disciple he’s supposed to be sparring with leaps at him, and Binghe steps aside at the last minute. This is a favorite tactic of Shen Qingqiu, forcing the enemy to expend all their energy.

Binghe is not supposed to know that Shen Qingqiu used these tactics because for many years he was far, far weaker than his opponents, and needed to use every advantage. While Shizun was in seclusion, Luo Binghe pestered every single hallmaster on Qing Jing peak for lessons to first bring his cultivation up to speed, and then so he could surpass bullies like Ming Fan and his little group of ‘friends’.

He beats the disciple easily, and barely uses his sword at all. He looks over at Liu Qingge who wears an annoyed expression.

“Hu Shen, Qi Xiaosi, both of you against Luo Binghe.” Liu Qingge says, arms crossed over his chest.

Apparently, Liu Shishu really is a *brute* just like Shizun always said. Luo Binghe holds on to his anger, uses it to fuel his muscles. And attacks as soon as the second boy steps into the ring. Luo Binghe gives no warning, just flashsteps, catching Qi Xiaoshi off guard. The Bai Zhan disciple goes down, and Binghe uses a talisman to pin him, then whirls, blocking an

attack from behind from He Shen. The angrier Binghe becomes, the faster he moves, and it's not long before He Shen is on the ground.

Utter silence from the watching Bai Zhan disciples.

"Get up," Liu Qingge orders his disciples. His gray eyes meet Luo Binghe's. "All right," Liu Qingge says. He draws Cheng Luan and walks into the ring. "Fight *me*."

Fuck. Well, Shizun always *did* like to tell Binghe that he gets himself into these situations as a result of his own impulsiveness. Fine. He'll probably get beaten into the dirt, but Luo Binghe is *not* going down without a fight.

He keeps his eyes on Liu Shishu's. In his mind he hears Shizun talking, *Watch the eyes, little beast, you'll be able to see when the decision is made, and then you move! Don't wait to get hit! The idea is to avoid them!*

He focuses on one thing: just a man in white with a big fucking sword. Grey eyes narrow, and Luo Binghe *leaps*. He evades the first attack, barely, but Liu Shishu is *unbelievably fast*, and much much stronger than Binghe could have imagined. He blocks a strike from Cheng Luan that is so heavily powered that for a moment Binghe thinks his arm might break.

He channels his qi into his sword arm instinctively, and something about that makes Liu Qingge's eyes *gleam*. Liu Qingge presses harder, moving forward, and not even using any qi, just his brute physical *strength*, battering his defenses.

Gritting his teeth, Luo Binghe pulls a talisman, and Liu Qingge *disintegrates* it, with a flick of his fingers. "No. No talismans," the war god snarls. "The whole point of you being here is so that you *don't* use them. Defend yourself!" He says this while leaping into the air, and directing a sword glare directly at Luo Binghe's head.

He flings himself to the side, rolling and coming back to his feet, sending a strike at Liu Qingge of his own. Liu Qingge knocks it aside easily, and *dives* out of the air right at Luo Binghe!

What the fuck! More pounding strikes, until Luo Binghe can only use his qi to strengthen his arms to block the blows. Overwhelmed, he has no idea what he's supposed to be doing.

Liu Qingge knocks Binghe's feet out from under him, and holds Cheng Luan at his throat. For a long moment, he looks into Luo Binghe's eyes, and Binghe wonders if the other man really will kill him.

He gets his legs up, and uses his qi to shove Liu Qingge off him. Liu Qingge probably could have slit his throat if he really wanted to, but allows himself to be shoved. The War God eyes Luo Binghe appraisingly.

"I was about to ask if you conceded, but I see that you have not. Defend yourself!" Luo Binghe thinks that Liu Qingge sounds way too happy about it.

When it's over, when Luo Binghe really *can't* get up anymore, Liu Qingge leans over him, Cheng Luan still disturbingly close to his neck. Luo Binghe flops his head back on the ground. "Just kill me," he mutters, and Liu Qingge *laughs*.

Luo Binghe blinks. He's…never seen Liu Qingge smile or have *any* expression besides annoyed. His breath catches.

Liu Qingge stands up, stores his sword, and brushes the dirt from his robes. He leans down, offering a hand, and Binghe takes it. Liu Qingge effortlessly tugs Luo Binghe to his feet, only for him to nearly pass out.

"Oops," Liu Qingge says, chagrined. Warm fingers wrap around Luo Binghe's wrist, and he passes qi. "There you go," he says approvingly, and Luo Binghe has no idea what's happening. A warm rush of qi flows through him, and Luo Binghe feels like his body is waking up. The worst of the bruising along his flank and back eases and the crack in his ribs knits back together.

When Liu Shishu is finished, he claps Luo Binghe on the shoulder, nearly sending him to the ground again. Grey eyes meet his own. "You did well," Liu Shishu says, looking pleased. "Meet me here in two days." He turns and walks away.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: *what he means* Make me proud

LBH: *what he hears* DO NOT EMBARRASS ME

LQG: Here, fight some disciples

LBH: *puts a beating on them*

LQG: *oh* This is going to be FUN.

LBH: I AM TERRIBLE AT THIS

LQG: This brat lasted for TEN WHOLE MINUTES! Not bad!

I swear, THIS TIME, the extras will be a reasonable length!! I mean it!!

Come tell me what you think! :)

LBH Extra part 2

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: LOL SQQ's particular brand of caring and LBH horny gripping

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two days later, Luo Binghe walks over the bridge to Bai Zhan peak for his 'lessons'. He has no idea what time he's supposed to be there, or where he's supposed to be. Thanks for being so specific, Liu Shishu! That's super helpful!

The lower training fields are empty, and there's no Bai Zhan disciples around. Hands on his hips, Luo Binghe huffs in annoyance. He walks back up the steps to the main area of the peak and follows the pathway which he's pretty sure will lead to Liu Shishu's residence.

He finds a modest house ensconced in a wooded area. In comparison, Shizun's bamboo house is much more humble. This residence is quite a bit bigger and looks like it's made from sturdier materials, thick wood planks and stone.

Luo Binghe knocks on the door. It opens so quickly, that Luo Binghe takes a step back, and nearly falls down the three steps.

"WHAT." Liu Shishu demands, expression fierce. "Oh, it's you. What are you doing here?"

Exhaling heavily, Luo Binghe says, "You told me to come back in two days." He spreads his palms. "It's been two days."

A deep frown line appears between Liu Qingge brows. "Huh, all right. I haven't slept for a few days. I've been working on paperwork."

"For *two days*?" Luo Binghe asks, appalled. "Why is it taking so long?"

Liu Qingge motions him to come in and then slams the door shut. "Why is it- because some of us aren't used to having to do nothing but *write* for days at a time."

Rolling his eyes, Luo Binghe says, "It's not that hard." He smiles sweetly. "Shizun doesn't have *any* trouble getting his paperwork done on time." It's only a small lie. Most of the time, Shen Qingqiu *doesn't* have any trouble, except when Mu Shishu is angry at him and then he mopes around the peak.

"Oh, really, you little brat? Well, come take a look then, and tell me what you think!" Liu Shishu grabs Binghe by the elbow and drags him over to the table where there are stacks of

paperwork in various stages of done.

Luo Binghe makes a face. “Liu Shishu is certainly…unorganized.” He peers over, eying the inkstone. “Your ink is too runny, how are you even *writing* with this?”

Liu Qingge’s face turns pink, and the line between his brows just gets deeper. “If you think you can do better, fix it then!” He crosses his arms over his chest.

Sighing, Luo Binghe just says, “Yes, Shishu.” Honestly, he thinks. Is it so hard to grind ink? He uses his qi and cleans the inkstone completely. Then he adds a couple drops of water to it and starts grinding the inkstick. In a very short time, the ink is perfect for writing. “There you go.”

Looking at the freshly ground ink, Liu Qingge wears a complicated expression. Appearing absolutely *pained*, he says, “Thank you.” Then he adds defensively, “I’m not an *idiot* you know, but this is *Bai Zhan* peak. No one teaches that stuff here.”

It’s a little unclear why Liu Shishu thinks he needs to explain himself to a disciple, let alone one from another peak. He imagines Shen Qingqiu scolding him *Think, little beast! That brute is obviously insecure because you know something that he doesn’t*. That’s what makes him say, “There is no shame in not knowing things you were never taught.”

Liu Qingge meets his eyes then, and he looks a little startled, like he thought that Binghe might have said something else. Then he looks away. “Fine. Today we’re going to start with some meditations to strengthen your body-mind connection.”

Binghe has no idea what that means, but he supposes he’ll find out.

So what Liu Qingge means for him to do is focus his attention on very specific body parts and practice strengthening them with qi. The goal is to strengthen his entire body and be able to *hold* that connection for long periods of time.

It sounds simple. It is most definitely *not*.

The process feels completely alien to Luo Binghe. On Qing Jing, the focus is on qi circulation, making sure that you are guiding qi specifically through your meridians, though it is taught how to strengthen certain *senses* like hearing or sight.

This new way of meditating just feels…wrong. Naturally, Binghe struggles with it. After perhaps half a sichen, Liu Qingge kneels next to Luo Binghe on the floor, where he’s been sitting on a cushion and practicing.

The peak lord presses his fingertips to Luo Binghe’s wrist and instructs him to try the exercise again. Luo Binghe tries, frustrated, knowing that he’s not doing it right.

Sure enough, Liu Qingge frowns and says, “No, no- what are you? Damn, Qing Jing- it, your qi doesn’t have to *stay* only in your meridians, right? Just think, if you used a palm strike, it’s not just staying in the meridians in your hand and arm, is it?” He withdraws his hand. “Take my pulse, and *feel* what I’m doing as I run through the exercise.”

Again, Luo Binghe feels like he doesn't know what he's doing. But he obediently presses the tips of his fingers to Liu Qingge's wrist and stretches out his senses while Liu Qingge meditates.

Luo Binghe's eyes drift shut and he follows the flow of Liu Shishu's qi.

He feels the way it seeps into Liu Qingge's entire body, like a river overflowing the banks and overtaking the floodplain. All at once, Luo Binghe is all too aware of Liu Qingge's body, and the flow of energy through it.

"Now, you try," Liu Qingge says, and shifts their hands so that his fingers wrap around Luo Binghe's *other* hand. Luo Binghe is still sensing the flow of qi in the older man, but now, Liu Qingge is doing the same thing back to him!

It feels weirdly *intimate* in a way that Luo Binghe was not expecting or prepared for. And then the qi flow *shifts*, forming a circuit from Liu Qingge to Luo Binghe and then back again.

Luo Binghe's eyes fly open in surprise, and then he's looking wide-eyed into Liu Shishu's startled grey eyes. Liu Qingge takes a sharp breath, withdraws his qi back into his own body and yanks his hands away from Binghe's like he's been burned.

Looking away, Liu Shishu stands up. "You should be able to manage on your own now. You will meditate while I finish my paperwork, and then we can spar."

It turns out that when Liu Qingge wants to be, he's an effective teacher. Luo Binghe wonders how angry Shen Qingqiu might get if he told him that. He imagines the way Shizun narrows his eyes and glares. *Out, Little Beast!* the Shen Qingqiu in his mind snaps, and Luo Binghe starts meditating.

Some time later, Liu Qingge rouses him. "Luo Binghe."

Opening his eyes, Luo Binghe glances over at the table. Liu Shishu has twisted on his chair, one arm resting on the back of it casually. "Shishu."

"Get up. Let's spar." Liu Qingge taps his foot impatiently while Binghe rises.

Luo Binghe thinks of the *war god* trapped at a table doing paperwork for a few days and wants to laugh. Then he realizes that said war god will certainly be taking his frustration out on Luo Binghe, and doesn't feel so amused.

Again, they walk to the lower training field. Bai Zhan disciples materialize out of nowhere and Luo Binghe wonders if they have someone stalking Liu Qingge's whereabouts. They look plenty eager to watch and Luo Binghe doesn't get it. What's so interesting about watching someone get pummeled into the dirt?

By the time he walks into the ring, more Bai Zhan disciples show up. Dismayed, Luo Binghe looks over at Liu Shishu, who just scoffs.

"Ignore them," Liu Qingge says. "Focus on *me*."

Luo Binghe swallows. That. That doesn't seem to be a problem, Shishu! He watches Liu Qingge's eyes. This time he feels the flare of the older man's qi just before he moves, and Luo Binghe flips backwards out of range. Liu Shishu is waiting when he lands though, and Luo Binghe takes a strike from his hand to the collarbone before kicking Liu Qingge's knee.

It affects the war god not at all, and Liu Qingge even grins at him. "Nice try, brat, you need to work harder than that." He draws Cheng Luan, the great blade shining brightly, like it's reflecting its owner's glee.

Luo Binghe blocks, and blocks and blocks again. Think! He tells himself. Why did he have Binghe do that meditation? Why did he make sure that Binghe could do it *right*? Why did he make him practice *before* the spar?

Obviously, you're supposed to be using your qi like that, little beast Shen Qingqiu's voice whispers in his mind.

Somehow concentrating while Liu Qingge batters him with his sword *isn't* the hardest thing Luo Binghe's ever done in his life. Compared to everything else, this should be easy. He remembers the feel of Liu Qingge's qi, the way it flowed like a flooding river overtaking the banks, and Luo Binghe *flexes* his qi, drenching his entire lower body in spiritual energy.

Shizun told the truth after all. Binghe *is* adept at spiritual cultivation. He *moves*, the muscles of his legs stronger and faster now. He ignores the ripple of murmurs from the watching crowd, and ducks under Cheng Luan. He rolls briefly on the ground before bounding up, sending a qi blast at Liu Qingge's torso.

Liu Qingge whirls elegantly, robes flaring. In the background a tree takes the blast, sending the trunk up and out of the ground. Liu Qingge moves in close now, battering Luo Binghe's defenses down. He's not even using both hands on his sword!

He's not using both hands on his sword.

Luo Binghe feints, and Liu Qingge pounces, thrusting forward with his sword arm. Except, Binghe's not there anymore! Luo Binghe lunges at Liu Qingge, bending one knee down to the ground, while reaching up and grabbing the sword-free wrist.

Liu Qingge breaks the hold easily, but that's fine! The fraction of a second Shishu spent doing that gives Luo Binghe the opportunity to push off the ground and butt his head into Liu Qingge's chest at full strength.

They both go down, Liu Qingge on his back, with Luo Binghe half sprawled on top of him. Blinking stupidly, Luo Binghe thinks he might have given himself a concussion. Underneath him, Liu Qingge stares up at him. His mouth doesn't move, but his grey eyes tilt up at the corners.

"Get up, brat," Liu Qingge says, giving Luo Binghe a shove. "You know I could have ripped your head from your body with that move."

Slowly getting to his feet, Luo Binghe brushes the dirt from his robes. He makes his eyes big and round. Innocent. “But Shishu said this was just a spar. Surely he wouldn’t rip this disciple’s head off?”

“You’re making it more likely with every word!” Liu Qingge tells him.

Luo Binghe loses track of time as the spar continues. His body doesn’t hurt, which seems weird. But blows that would have stunned him a few days ago, he shrugs off today. Until, that is, the fight is over when his body just…gives out. His knees turn to jelly and Luo Binghe drops to the ground.

He stares up at the sky stupidly, not understanding what the hell just happened.

Liu Qingge leans over him. Their eyes meet, and Liu Shishu grins. “Did I forget to mention? You have to build up to using that qi technique to last for an entire fight. It’s impressive you kept it up so long." Crouching down, he sends a qi messenger off to someone, and starts transferring qi.

When Luo Binghe wakes up, he’s on Qian Cao peak in one of the beds. One of the healers gives him a wry look.

“Hello, Luo Binghe. I am Wu Yanshin, the head disciple. It’s been a long time since we’ve met and I doubt you’d remember. You’ve grown significantly,” she adds, looking amused.

Except, he kind of *does*. “When Mu Shishu brought me here,” Binghe recalls. He remembers Mu Shishu scooping him up after running his bullies off. He remembers the way that the older man held him close, murmuring things like, ‘such a cute little lotus, what did they do to you!’

Binghe used to dream about the way he’d been *safe* and held for the first time since forever. It’s a good memory.

“How did I get here?” Luo Binghe asks.

Arching an eyebrow, Wu Yanshin says, “You don’t remember?”

Brows knitting, Binghe tries to think back. “I was laying on the ground looking up at Liu Shishu.”

“Oh, yes,” Wu Yanshin says. “I’ve already talked to *him* about teaching people advanced mediation techniques without the proper fundamentals.”

“Uh?” Luo Binghe has never felt so dumb.

She stops the transfer and meets his eyes. “That *particular* meditation technique is only used on Bai Zhan peak for a *reason*.”

“Asking for enlightenment?”

Wu Yanshin sits back in her chair. “Bai Zhan cultivation involves using qi to-” She waves a hand in the air, “-rebuild the body, so to speak, fortifying the bones, muscles and tendons.” Leaning forward, she continues, “But there is a *series* of techniques to prepare the body for that kind of thing! You can’t just-” She closes her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. “You can’t just start someone at the fortification stage without all the preparation.”

Running a palm over her face, Wu Yanshin says, “Fortunately, you’re quite sturdy these days, so no lasting harm was done.”

“Can I go home then?” Binghe asks.

Smiling sweetly, Wu Yanshin says, “Oh, yes. Shen Shibo has been *waiting* for you to wake up.”

Oh, *shit*.

Binghe swallows. “He is?”

The door to the exam room slams open, and Shen Qingqiu walks through. He gives Healer Wu a nod, and she tells him, “Do not upset my patient.”

“Always delightful to see you, Healer Wu,” Shen Qingqiu drawls. Then his dark green eyes fix upon Luo Binghe. “Little beast, are you so stupid that you just *listen* to whatever Liu Qingge tells you to do?” He walks forward, drawing his fan and swats Binghe on the shoulder. *Thwap!*

“You told me to learn from him,” Luo Binghe protests. “How was I supposed to know that technique was too advanced?”

Shen Qingqiu crosses his arms. “Have you ever heard of *Liu Qingge* actually *teaching* any of those brutes anything? He usually just beats them up once a month or so.” Heavily, Shizun sinks into the chair that Wu Yanshin had used, right next to the bed. “Be grateful that Peak Lord Mu is off the mountain at one of his clinics.” Shen Qingqiu gives him a significant look.

Luo Binghe deflates. A lecture from Mu Shishu is worse than any punishment Shen Qingqiu gives him. Mostly because Mu Shishu gives him that *disappointed* look which is so much worse!

After a few moments of silence, Shen Qingqiu sniffs and says, “Well. At least Liu Shidi tells me you are progressing well. Look for him to be taking you on night hunts soon.”

Binghe sits up straight. “Really?!” Getting to hunt with the war god! *THWACK* goes Shen Qingqiu’s fan.

“STOP looking so excited about it, he’ll probably get you killed.” Shen Qingqiu glares.

Smiling, Luo Binghe thinks that’s Shizun’s way of worrying. “This disciple will be careful.”

Mollified, Shen Qingqiu says, “See that you are. You are a *Qing Jing* disciple and I expect you to be better than those mindless idiots next door.”

Luo Binghe does not ask why the leader of the Mindless Idiots is allowed to teach him. “Yes, Shizun.”

“And another thing,” Shen Qingqiu says, getting to his feet. “A bunch of Bai Zhan brats came looking for you, wanting to *spar*. Any idea why that might be?”

“This disciple doesn’t know.”

Shen Qingqiu narrows his eyes and says nothing.

“I don’t!” Luo Binghe protests. “Whenever I spar with Liu Shishu a bunch of his disciples stand around and gawk, it’s annoying!”

Sighing heavily, Shen Qingqui says, “Little beast did it occur to you that those mini-brutes are watching you because *you’re better than them*?”

“Uh, no, Shizun.” Luo Binghe says, feeling foolish. He picks at his nails. “I haven’t seen any of them fight Liu Shishu so I had no idea.”

“Hmm. Well. I expect you back on *my* peak this evening, Luo Binghe.” Shen Qingqiu gives him a stern look and then leaves.

Not long after, Wu Yanshin returns and gives Luo Binghe clearance to return to Qing Jing peak. He leaves the Healing Pavilion and walks to the bridge that leads to Bai Zhan peak.

Luo Binghe is lost in thought while he makes his way on foot, so he’s a little startled when a voice calls out, “Well?” Stopping, Luo Binghe finds Liu Shishu striding up to him on the pathway.

If this was Shizun, Binghe would say something formal like, ‘can this disciple be of service’. But he’s learned that Liu Shishu doesn’t like it when he’s formal. So instead he says, “Well, what?”

“Did I break you?” Liu Qingge demands, crossing his arms over his chest. “Shen Qingqiu wouldn’t tell me anything.”

Of course he wouldn’t. Luo Binghe says, “Healer Wu said that the meditation technique you taught me was too advanced, and that I shouldn’t skip the fundamentals.”
Brows knitting, Liu Qingge says, “I only taught you the way my shizun taught us.”

That actually explains so many things, Luo Binghe thinks, and is glad that Shizun’s not listening to this conversation. “Shizun said that you wanted to take me hunting?”

Liu Shishu brightens. “Yes. It’s a little annoying that you’re more suited to my peak than any of my *actual* disciples.” He meets Binghe’s eyes. “You should have been *mine*.”

Luo Binghe’s stomach clenches and he takes a deep breath. He knows that Liu Shishu doesn’t mean it like *that*, but…as an orphan, hearing that from a grown man, especially one so…

“I will come for you in two days. Bring supplies to stay a few nights camping.” Liu Shishu waits for Luo Binghe to nod, then turns and walks off without another word.

He can’t help partially turning and watching the sway of Liu Qingge’s long ponytail against the small of his back, and Binghe wonders what it would feel like to run his fingers through it.

Oh, he thinks. Oh, *no*.

Chapter End Notes

LQG: This little BRAT is talented at fighting AND can grind perfect ink??? He should have been MINE

LBH: *oh dear gods*

SQQ: If that brute hurts ONE HAIR on that STUPID FLUFFY HEAD I will come after him with the fire of a THOUSAND burning SUNS.

LBH extra #3

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: None!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luo Binghe decides that he is going to pretend that he did not in fact, have that 'oh no' moment and keep going as he was. *I can do this*, he tells himself, while composing a poem. *I can do this*, he tells himself while cooking breakfast for Shizun and Mu Shishu. *I can definitely do this*, he thinks, studying in the library with Ning Shijie.

And then Liu Qingge shows up on Qing Jing peak while Luo Binghe is carrying a load of laundry from the river back to the dorms. Luo Binghe stops dead at the sight of the Bai Zhan peak lord impatiently glaring at him.

"Liu Shishu," Binghe says stupidly. He looks at the double armful of clean robes he's carrying around and shifts his feet awkwardly.

"What are you doing?" Liu Qingge demands, and Luo Binghe just blinks.

"Laundry?" His tone implies that Liu Shishu might be slightly insane for asking.

Waving a hand in the air, Liu Qingge says, "I'm going on a hunt."

Binghe raises his eyebrows. "Okay? Have a good trip."

"You're coming with me," Liu Qingge says flatly. "I already cleared it with Shen Qingqiu."

Yeah, but Binghe would like to double check that one. He feels pretty strongly that he's got a Shizun styled lecture due about it: *Little beast do NOT act like a Bai Zhan brute and go off in a rush without thinking*. "Maybe I should check with Shizun, though."

Liu Qingge sighs and wraps his fingers around Luo Binghe's upper arm. He looks deeply into Luo Binghe's eyes. "Look, I'm not lying, I justs came from his house." He makes a face. "He's visiting with Mu Shidi."

Luo Binghe snickers. "The dog food?"

"It's *terrible*," Liu Qingge says, rolling his eyes. "They are *awful* together. Be glad you didn't come on this hunt we all went on a few years back." He shakes his head. "Go on, get your stuff together so we can leave."

Luo Binghe is convinced. “All right. I’ll put this away and get some things together and meet you-”

“No need,” Liu Qingge says. “I’ll come with you.”

Binghe had no idea that the *war god* could be so positively *sticky*. What if he had stuff to do, Liu Shishu? What then? Oh, who is he kidding? Binghe would drop everything to go on a hunt with Liu Qingge, kind of like he’s doing now. “Fine,” he says, and starts walking to the dorms.

Fortunately, Luo Binghe is on the neater side, bed always made and things put away in the standard trunk given to all Qing Jing students. He has a qiankun pouch (traded an An Ding disciple some baked goods for it, Binghe clearly got the better end of the deal there) and stashes two extra sets of robes, some dried fruits, a waterskin-

“You don’t need all that stuff,” Liu Qingge says judgmentally. “Just take a change of clothes. We can hunt for meat and find water while we travel.”

Okay, why is he in such a rush? “Shizun tells me not to forget what peak I belong to,” Binghe says dryly. “That includes bringing some food and water.” And several knives, because according to Shen Qingqiu you can never have too many. Still, he finishes packing quickly, lest Shishu lose all patience. “Where are we going?”

Brightening, Liu Qingge says, “Where do you want to go?”

Luo Binghe is beginning to understand why Shizun finds this man frustrating. “I don’t know enough to have an opinion,” he says, and Liu Qingge looks *disappointed*.

“Usually I don’t have a specific plan, I just go where I feel like, unless I hear about a monster or beast bothering some town or something.” Liu Qingge tells him, watching as Binghe tucks the pouch into his sleeves. “A lot of times, people will stop me and tell me of a beast that needs killing.” He sounds very cheerful about this.

Flying with Liu Qingge is a challenge because he seems to have no idea of what a reasonable speed is. The first few times he flew ahead so fast Luo Binghe literally had no idea which way to go! He had to hover until the other man finally remembered he had a travel buddy and graciously slowed way the fuck down.

“It would be faster if you rode on Cheng Luan,” Liu Qingge tells him two sichen in when Binghe asked for a break.

Luo Binghe tries not to let any actual expressions cross his face. He knows he’s failing when Liu Qingge demands, “What, you think I can’t?”

That is *definitely* not the problem. “No, that’s not-”

But Liu Qingge is not known for being a particularly stable person, and he steps onto his sword and says harshly, “Luo Binghe, get up here. My sword is plenty big enough for us

both."

This is just not fair, Binghe thinks. Why is Liu Qingge like this? "Shishu-"

"Just call me Liu Qingge," Liu Qingge says impatiently as they get going. "You know my name, just use it."

Exhaling heavily, Luo Binghe says, "Okay, Liu Qingge." It feels so *weird* to address not just a senior, but a *Peak Lord* so informally. Anyway, he climbs up behind Liu Qingge.

"Hold on," Liu Qingge says, "We're going to go *fast*." No sooner does Binghe put his hands hesitantly around Liu Qingge's waist, then they take off like a shooting star.

"What the fuck!" Luo Binghe shrieks, but the wind carries it away before the cry ever reaches Liu Qingge's ears. His arms tighten, and Liu Qingge huffs a laugh.

"You're fine," he calls, "Stop panicking."

"This isn't panic," Binghe shouts, "It's very real fear!"

For some reason that makes Liu Qingge laugh long and hard. Surprisingly, he talks a lot to Binghe while they travel. So much so that Luo Binghe wonders if the other man might actually be kind of lonely. It seems like he spends most of his time by himself, and clearly no one else can keep up with his cultivation, except maybe for Sect Leader Yue.

But traveling like this, speaking informally, having his arms wrapped around Liu Qingge-it's all giving him Ideas. Thoughts. Things that he definitely should NOT be thinking.

Eventually they make a stop in the middle of nowhere, near a lake with abnormally clear blue water. Liu Qingge peers at it, then takes a talisman and sends it straight into the water. It sends a small fountain of pink tinted water into the air for several seconds before subsiding. "Don't drink that," Liu Qingge says. He catches Luo Binghe's gaze. "That water is poisoned with aphrodisiac effects. If it was safe to drink the little fountain would have been clear. Any water that looks that beautiful, is almost always a trap." He looks happy about it. "Maybe there's some succubus demons around," Liu Qingge says hopefully.

Luo Binghe runs a hand over his face. "Maybe," he says weakly. He's pretty unclear about how he, a disciple for a whole different peak, is somehow going to be the voice of reason for this outing.

"Come on, let's walk and see if anything happens." Liu Qingge marches off without waiting and Binghe quickly trots after him.

"Is this what you usually do?" Luo Binghe says curiously. "Just…wander around and see if stuff happens?"

Liu Qingge snorts. "You say it like that, but something almost *always* happens."

Luo Binghe really, really hopes that Liu Qingge isn't just speaking things into existence. Mu Shishu calls it putting up a death flag. At least the area they landed in is quite pretty. The lake

is surrounded by a large meadow filled with tall grasses. Far in the distance Luo Binghe sees tall trees, but for now the sun beats down on them.

Liu Qingge keeps pace at his side and it feels surprisingly companionable. They cross the meadow unmolested, but as they approach the woods, Liu Qingge tenses. He stops, holding up a hand in a way that probably means stop, or quiet.

Flashing a quick smile at Binghe, Liu Qingge manifests his sword. Binghe hears the sound of wings flapping but doesn't see any birds. He pulls Zheng Yang on principle, and keeps alert.

Liu Qingge leaps into the air, slicing Cheng Luan down in an arc and all of the sudden, red feathers rain down upon them. Something hits the ground with a *thump*. Liu Qingge strides forward, and leans down. When he stands up, he's holding out a hand full of…nothing.

Luo Binge blinks. "What do you have?"

"Dinner," Liu Qingge says cheerfully. As he's standing there proudly, color fades into the 'nothing' he's holding, first outlining a general bird shape, and then between one blink and the next, Liu Qingge is clearly holding a large bright crimson bird by the neck. It's very, very *dead*. "The Invisible Crimson Quail," Liu Qingge says. "It's only invisible until after you kill it."

"I have some skill at cooking," Binghe offers, and Liu Qingge hands over the bird. Luo Binge has years of proficiency at cleaning kills under his belt. During those few years on Qing Jing when he wasn't able to eat very much, he got quite good at catching wild animals. Ning Shijie had given him a rather dull knife to use, and Binghe discovered on his own how to sharpen it, and the best way to clean the animals. Fortunately, there were a few hallmasters that didn't mind answering questions, no matter how random they seemed which definitely helped. In retrospect his part demon heritage probably kept him from getting sick after eating them.

Liu Qingge gets the fire going and takes a brief trip into the woods, bringing back sturdy branches which he uses to make a roasting spit.

Once it's cleaned, Binghe seasons it with salt and ground garlic and Liu Qingge arranges it over the fire to cook.

For awhile they sit in silence watching the fire. Eventually, Liu Qingge turns to Luo Binghe and says, "You're not like most disciples of Qing Jing peak." He sounds both confused and a little annoyed.

Binghe rolls his eyes. "I'm not a rich young master," he says wryly. "Most everyone there is. Shizun isn't either." He watches the other man carefully.

"I thought for a long time he was," Liu Qingge admits. "You know we were in seclusion at the same time? Well, I had a qi deviation and he saved my life. Cursed at me the entire time." He meets Binghe's eyes.

Luo Binghe laughs. “That sounds like Shizun. He only fusses because he cares. Believe me, if he didn’t care, he wouldn’t even acknowledge you existed.” He tries not to think about when that was true. Somehow, Shen Qingqiu changed a few years ago, and because of that, *Binghe’s* life changed. For the better, thank all the gods.

When the bird is ready, Luo Binghe produces a plate from his qiankun pouch, setting the bird on it, and carving it into pieces. Liu Qingge watches this process in interest.

“I usually just tear the meat off and eat it,” he says, and it’s amazing how unsurprised Luo Binghe is to hear this.

“As expected of the *war god*,” Luo Binghe says, and Liu Qingge just snorts. Binghe watches carefully as Liu Qingge takes the first bite of meat.

Liu Qingge’s eyes widen in surprise and then close. He chews slowly. When he opens his eyes, he fixes them on Luo Binghe. “This is…*very* good.” He frowns at the bird. “I’ve had this many times and it’s never…” Their eyes meet over the fire. “This is a pleasure to eat,” he says finally, and digs in to the rest of his meal.

Luo Binghe watches Liu Shishu lick his fingers and thinks faintly that he might not survive this mission.

The next day is similar, Luo Binghe riding on the back of Liu Qingge’s sword while they travel. They come across a small town which is mostly a few huts on the side of a river, and the local people ask the great masters to deal with haunting.

It’s not a ghost, just a run of the mill nest of small rodent demons. The two cultivators destroy the nest and they move on. For a while they follow the river. Like Liu Qingge had said, it *did* seem like wherever he stopped, people would have some minor pest that required a cultivator to deal with.

All this time, Luo Binghe had thought that Liu Qingge was out hunting large beasts for fun, but it turns out he was just flying around looking for people to help? Binghe thinks that if this was more widely known, Liu Qingge wouldn’t have such a reputation as someone who mindlessly left destruction in his wake.

A couple of nights later, while Luo Binghe is cleaning the rather large two horned forest hare he asks, “Have you ever traveled like this with someone before?”

Liu Qingge looks up from where he’s stomping down grass so he can clear the area for a fire. “No.” Then he grins. “You’re the first. I thought you’d be a lot more annoying than this.”

Now used to remarks like that, Luo Binghe doesn’t take offense. He just smiles and says, “I’m glad Peak Lord Liu isn’t as annoying as I thought *he’d* be.”

Huffing, Liu Qingge looks away. “Don’t call me that. Out here, we’re just people.”

Out here, just traveling and living off the land (mostly) feels very freeing. Binghe likes falling asleep looking up at the stars. Sometimes when he wakes in the middle of the night,

he looks over expecting to find Liu Qingge sleeping. But Liu Qingge seems to prefer meditation, settling far enough from the smoldering embers of their fire so that if something happened he'd be able to see clearly.

With the moon shining overhead, it throws Liu Qingge's face into sharp relief, the shadows highlighting his cheekbones and the strong jaw. Luo Binghe should be sleeping, he knows. It feels illicit to watch Liu Shishu meditate, but he can't seem to look away. He's so strong, sometimes it feels like traveling with a mountain. Or a typhoon, he thinks wryly.

But in getting to know Liu Qingge, Binghe is finding that he actually *likes* him so much! He doesn't talk in circles like Shizun does. If he's happy he laughs, if he's angry he yells. Every once in a while, he *blushes* for no reason that Binghe can figure out. It's like the older man…

Oh, Luo Binghe realizes. Is it possible that Liu Qingge has never had a *friend* before? *Are* they friends? No, he can't count on that being true when they get back to the sect. Luo Binghe is just a disciple, and not even one on Liu Qingge's peak. He sighs, and decides to close his eyes and try to sleep.

"What's wrong?" Liu Qingge asks quietly.

It's a good thing it's dark, so the flush on his cheeks won't show. "I was just thinking, apologies for disturbing you." Luo Binghe sits up.

Looking directly at him, Liu Qingge says, "You didn't." For a long moment he meets Binghe's eyes. "Something's bothering you. Just say it."

To be honest, Luo Binghe was not expecting to be called out over a sigh. "I was just thinking to myself that I like traveling with you." He's not sure, but it looks like Liu Qingge's expression softens. "And I was just thinking that when we get back to the sect…I'll miss it." *I'll miss you* is what Luo Binghe really wants to say, but clearly that's a step too far.

Liu Qingge looks at the ground. He takes a deep breath and lets it out. "You can come with me in the future."

"Liu Shishu is kind." Binghe says, shifting on his bedroll. He's pretty sure that Liu Qingge just snorts.

"Go to sleep, Binghe. I'll keep watch." Liu Qingge says, effectively ending the conversation.

Turning on his side, Luo Binghe watches through his eyelashes as Liu Qingge resettle himself into a light meditation. The gentle press of his qi sweeping over Luo Binghe just brings up more questions. Liu Qingge was monitoring him the whole time? Of course it makes sense that the older man would use his qi to keep track of the surroundings.

But it makes Binghe feels safe and watched over, nonetheless. Right before he falls asleep, he thinks, *He called me Binghe*.

Chapter End Notes

LQG: Invites handsome man to ride on his sword
LQG: Invites handsome man to use his name, not his title
LQG: What are these *feelings*
LQG: !!!! *Every time Binghe walks past the fire in his inner robes, literally nothing left to the imagination*
LQG: *quietly* oh no

LBH extra #4

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: Shameless Binghe has entered the chat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next days pass quickly, and then they've been traveling for a week. Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge continue to follow the narrow river during that time, taking care of problems and small hunts for the local people.

In one of the little towns, Luo Binghe insists on sending a message back to the sect, requesting that Mu Shishu hold a clinic for them. Some other charlatan of a doctor diagnosed some of the people with 'ghosts' when clearly something else is going on. All those visits with Mu Shishu for the last three years have imbued Luo Binghe with some basic (very basic) medical knowledge and even *he* knows that drinking mercury is not a cure for shit.*

Liu Qingge rolls his eyes but sends the message to Qian Cao. They don't wait around-it will likely take a couple of days for the healers to arrange a visit, and Liu Qingge gets restless easily.

They happen to find a much larger community a few sichen of flying time later and Luo Binghe gets Liu Qingge to pause for some shopping and to restock supplies.

Binghe needs more spices.

Weirdly, girls start following him around while Luo Binghe peruses the market. Young women keep stopping him to ask questions.

"Master Cultivator is so strong! Where does he study?"

"Master Cultivator is so handsome! Is he looking for a wife?"

And like that. Binghe politely brushes them all off, but for some reason Liu Qingge's frown gets deeper and deeper each time it happens.

To be honest, Luo Binghe is kind of surprised that *he's* the one getting bugged by the local girls and not the much older, much better looking and more powerful peak lord he's traveling with.

When Liu Qingge nearly growls at some poor young woman, Luo Binghe elbows him sharply in the side. "Behave," he says without thinking, only realizing a moment later what

he's done. He peeks up at Liu Qingge's face expecting him to be furious, but instead he looks…*weird*.

Something about that exchange seems to get it through to the locals and then they leave them alone to shop. Finally, Binghe thinks. He finds the salt, and buys some fresh green onions, and more bulbs of garlic. He pays for his items and continues wandering the street stalls.

He finds a vendor selling knives, and they're really beautiful, with bone handles inlaid with mother of pearl. The blades are honed steel. Luo Binghe tests the edges and finds them exquisitely sharp, too! He picks one for himself, and then on a whim, chooses one for Liu Qingge. The one he intends on gifting has a handle with a dragon engraved on it, the tail wrapping around the hilt.

Luo Binghe presents the knife when he catches up to Liu Qingge, only a few stalls up the road. "Liu Qingge," Binghe calls, and Liu Qingge turns, then smiles when he sees him. "Here," Binghe says. "This is for you." He hands over the wrapped parcel.

Brows knitting, Liu Qingge slowly unwraps the gift. He stares down at the knife with a complicated expression, and when he meets Binghe's eyes he very much looks like he wants to say something important. Instead though, he just says, "Thank you, I will use it well." He tucks it into his sleeve with care.

They continue traveling. That same evening, out of nowhere, Liu Qingge makes a sudden shift on the sword, swooping them down and under -*something*. Only Luo Binghe's death grip round Liu Qingge's waist keeps him on Cheng Luan.

"Sorry," Liu Qingge calls, head partially turned to the side. "There was an Abyssal vent, and I didn't want to take us through it."

Mouth falling open, Binghe manages, "That was smart." Understatement of the year, he thinks. "Do they just…pop up like that?"

Liu Qingge takes them back up, hovering near enough that they can observe the vent closely without being in danger if anything happens to come through. "Seems like. Doesn't happen very often though." He shrugs. "You really can't tell when the Endless Abyss is going to open somewhere though, but it's through that the Abyssal Vents become more frequent the closer the Abyss is to opening."

"Does anyone know what triggers the Abyss to open in the first place?" Luo Binghe asks.

"I'm not Shen Qingqiu," Liu Qingge retorts. "Ask him when you see him."

From where they're hovering, directly in front of the thing-or Binghe supposes- directly behind it, the Vent looks like a slit in reality. It's a pitch black line against the sky. Faintly, the air radiates around it, like waves of heat on the stone during the height of summer.

It feels…malevolent.

“Does stuff just come through there from the Abyss?” Luo Binghe asks, and Liu Qingge sighs. He seems annoyed, so Binghe adds, “Sorry, never mind.”

Liu Qingge twists on the sword, deep lines between his brows. “I’m not angry, I just don’t know.”

“Oh,” Binghe says, still feeling uncomfortable.

“Look, it’s fine, don’t-” Liu Qingge’s voice cuts off. In a milder tone he says, “If you have questions, ask them. I probably can’t answer most of them, but it’s fine. I don’t want you to…” He seems to be struggling to express himself. With difficulty, Liu Qingge says, “Who you are…is good. Don’t try to be someone else. Not for me, not for *anyone*.”

Luo Binghe’s eyes start stinging, and he turns his cheek into Liu Qingge’s back. His arm is still wrapped around Liu Qingge’s waist, and he squeezes a little harder than usual. There’s a brief touch on his hand, so feather light, Binghe would think he imagined it, but for the pink flush to Liu Qingge’s cheeks.

When he feels like he can raise his head again without doing something insanely stupid, Binghe says, “I wonder how long they last, and if they close on their own.”

“From what I’ve heard they close on their own in less than a sichen. Since we don’t know when this one opened, we should watch it, and make sure nothing comes through.” Liu Qingge gestures below them.

They’ve been loosely following this narrow river west toward the mountains of Kunlun and aside from that one larger town with a decent market, most of the places they’ve stopped have been very…humble. Binghe doesn’t want to think about any Abyssal monsters slipping through the crack into this world, and how they would obliterate the mortal people in the area.

No sooner does he have that thought than three flying creatures emerge whole from the Vent. Binghe blinks, like he might be hallucinating, but Liu Qingge says, “Shit,” so he must see it too.

“Hop on your sword,” Liu Qingge says. “Stay on the ground, air fighting is difficult when you’re not used to it. I’ll try and send one your way.” He turns his head to the side so he can see Binghe. “Don’t do anything too stupid.” And then he shoves Binghe off Cheng Luan.

Hastily, Luo Binghe calls Zheng Yang to catch him. *Asshole*, he thinks, but follows directions and lands.

This is not a wide open area. There’s trees scattered everywhere, in twos and threes. Fortunately, enough space is left between so there’s no large canopy overhead blocking Binghe’s sight lines. He stands alert and ready, fingers tight on the hilt of his sword.

Overhead, Liu Qingge zips back and forth, trying to herd the bird like creatures toward the ground. He sends out qi blasts from his palm that crease on of the not-birds, and foul smelling feathers drift down.

A few land on the grass close to Binghe so he walks over to take a closer look. Where they've landed the grass is singed black. Oh, that's not good. He cranes his neck, trying to see what's happening. He stretches out with his qi, staying alert, and it's a good thing because something approaches quickly from behind.

Binghe whirls around. His eyes go wide, and he dives out of the way as a creature attacks him claws first. The head reminds him of an eagle, but the beak is much bigger and the white markings on its nearly black feathers make it look like a skeleton. The feet and talons are *huge*, and Binghe does *not* want to find out what any wounds feel like from them.

The Bone Eagle wheels around, black eyes fixing on Binghe. More prepared for it this time, he leaps into the air sending a powerful sword glare at it. It strikes the creature and knocks some feathers off, but that's *it*.

You better not have forgotten everything I taught you, little beast, the Shen Qingqiu in his mind whispers, and Binghe makes a sword seal, sending Zheng Yang shooting away from him, slicing the bird directly with its blade.

He follows it up with a talisman that renders it paralyzed. The talisman strikes true, and the bird falls out of the air, hitting the ground with a solid *thump*. Binghe strides forward, calling his sword back to his hands and decapitates it.

The blood steams as it pours from the neck and the surrounding grasses wilt immediately.

Luo Binghe leaves it there for the moment, and searches the sky for Liu Qingge. Realistically, he knows that the Bai Zhan peak lord will be fine but….he bites his lip, waiting. He can't help worrying. All at once, Luo Binghe thinks, what if he's hurt somewhere? Or an eagle killed him?

The thought makes him nauseous, and his chest hurts. Stop it, he tells himself. As if a stupid bird could hurt Liu Qingge! Binghe killed one himself, and he's still a disciple. That line of thinking makes him feel better, but he still paces anxiously. Maybe he should fly up and take a look around?

He draws his sword-

"Going somewhere?" Liu Qingge drawls from behind him, and Luo Binghe whirls around.

"Qingge! You're all right!" Luo Binghe, not thinking *whatsoever*, flings himself at Liu Qingge. He's expecting to get cuffed on the back of the head like Shizun does, but instead Liu Qingge just…accepts it? He gets a nice hard squeeze that feels *way too good*, followed by some awkward back patting.

"Brat, it would take a lot more than that to hurt me," Liu Qingge scoffs. He does not take a step back though, and Binghe, always ready to push his luck, just clings harder.

Luo Binghe knows he's too old to feel like this but…having spent so much time with Liu Qingge, just the thought of him not being in this world anymore is enough to make him cry.

“Are you…*crying*?” Liu Qingge says incredulously. His hand moves to Binghe’s head where it settles into his hair. “...” It’s clear he doesn’t know what to say or how to handle this, so he apparently decides to hug Binghe as tight as he can.

Which is pretty tight! And pretty great!

“Binghe. I’m *fine*. Why are you so upset?”

There’s no good way to answer that question, Binghe knows. He wipes his tears, and shrugs. “I hope you don’t think we’re eating those things,” he says instead, and Liu Qingge laughs.

Prying himself away from Luo Binghe, Liu Qingge tilts his head so he can meet his gaze. “Better?” His hands linger on Binghe’s upper arms.

Embarrassed, Luo Binghe looks away and nods.

Giving him a skeptical glance, Liu Qingge changes the topic. “Did you get one?” When Binghe doesn’t answer right away, Liu Qingge prods him in the stomach, making him yelp.

“Did I? Yeah, it’s back there.” Luo Binghe tells him, gesturing over his shoulder.

“Let’s go see,” Liu Qingge says, taking hold of Binghe’s wrist and tugging him in the direction he wants to go.

Binghe doesn’t protest. His mind is still spinning from the long hug and the teasing. They find the dead Bone Eagle quickly enough, the head still separated from the body and the grasses surrounding it are very dead.

“Huh,”Liu Qingge says, “I guess their blood is poisoned or something.” He extends a hand and immolates it with a burst of qi. It flames high and bright, and then there’s nothing left but a circle of ash.

They stay in the area that night. Luo Binghe has been practicing using warning arrays and lays one down along the outside perimeter of their camp. Liu Qingge settles cross legged with his sword across his lap, a hand on the hilt and one on the sheath.

Luo Binghe sets up his bedroll closer to Liu Qingge than he usually does. He has to admit, the idea that an Abyssal vent can just …open up and start dumping monsters on them has him a little freaked out. He’s trying to make it seem like he’s calmer than he is, and he’s not sure he’s doing a great job.

Eventually, Liu Qingge opens his eyes, and jerks his chin at the empty space on his right side. “Put it there. Then you can sleep.” He closes his eyes again, but Luo Binghe feels the sweep of his qi pulsing out around them, watchful.

He tucks himself into the space around Liu Qingge’s body, curling his body toward the older man’s thigh.

When Binghe wakes the next morning, a comforting weight rests on his shoulder. He doesn’t open his eyes right away, and the weight of Liu Qingge’s hand moves slowly back and forth.

Is he…being petted??!! He may never open his eyes again!!

He snuggles in closer under the guise of sleep, and throws one arm over Liu Qingge's bent thigh. That just earns a huff from Liu Qingge, and the hand on Binghe's back moves up to his head where it runs over his hair.

"I know you're awake, Brat," Liu Qingge says calmly.

"I'm not," Luo Binghe says. He peeks up through slitted eyes. Liu Qingge is looking off into the distance, smiling. For once, the war god looks absolutely peaceful. Luo Binghe closes his eyes and rubs his cheek into Liu Qingge's thigh.

Surprisingly, Liu Qingge lets Binghe keep pretending to sleep. It's fine! Shame? What's that? Binghe has none! Besides, he tells himself, if Liu Qingge didn't want him to keep sneaking closer, he could certainly put as much distance between them as he wanted.

Therefore, Binghe is going to assume that Liu Qingge *wants* him to keep pushing the boundaries, bit by bit. If he protests, then of course, Binghe will back off. But until then?

Everything goes.

When they do start the day, Luo Binghe begins his campaign of attrition by walking straight up to Liu Qingge and just hugging him.

He gets a strong squeeze and back pats.

While they're traveling later, Luo Binghe wraps his arms around Liu Qingge's waist and *clings*.

He gets that featherlight brush of fingers over his hands.

When they stop that evening, Luo Binghe asks if he can brush Liu Qingge's hair.

Liu Qingge does eye him for several long seconds. Binghe may or may not be sweating. And then Liu Qingge pulls out a comb and hands it over.

The silken fall of Liu Qingge's near waist length hair sends Binghe into a state of euphoria. He runs his hands through the oh-so-soft and shining locks just for the feel of it. "Liu Qingge's hair is so beautiful," he murmurs, and begins running the comb through.

To his absolute *delight* Liu Qingge responds to this like a cat in a sunbeam. His shoulders relax and he slouches with a deep sigh. Once Luo Binghe tires of playing with Liu Qingge's hair (That's a lie! He never will!) he braids it neatly. He secures the end with a small piece of leather and then gives it a tug.

"I can comb your hair for you every night," Luo Binghe offers, resting his hands on Liu Qingge's shoulders. He doesn't get a response. "Is that all right?" he prods.

Turning his head to the side, Liu Qingge meets his eyes. His cheeks are pink. "Mn." After a few minutes he clears his throat. "Tomorrow we'll keep moving west. I heard some people

say there’s talk of Kirin-leeches further down the river. We should take care of them before they hurt someone.”

Chapter End Notes

** This is a reference to one of my favorite fics of all time! Tossawary's masterpiece: Pride is not the word I'm looking for

SQQ somewhere on Qing Jing Peak: I have a bad feeling about this

LBH: My plan is working!

LQG: If I make one wrong move I will scare him off.

Kirin Leeches: Definitely come see us to move the plot along

Hi everyone!!! I'm so glad you're enjoying the extras! I'm leaving for the beach tomorrow and probably won't post anything for the next 7 days!

Come tell me what you think!! Your comments are literally keeping me alive!! :)

Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: sexy times ahead. Consent is explicit!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lou Binghe hovers on his sword over the river looking for monsters. The Kirin leeches resembled water dragons with their large wide heads and jagged teeth. Their eyes shone like black diamonds and they had long white whiskers on either side of their mouth.

Their bodies were narrow and elongated with small arms and legs. Kirin leeches could actually walk upon land if they needed to, but mostly they undulated through the water efficiently.

Lou Binghe remembered these facts from a discussion he'd had with Mu Shishu about a year ago, back when the healer was particularly depressed. That was about the same time that Mu Shishu inflicted a very unwanted lecture upon treating aphrodisiac poison since the Kirin leeches were particularly prone to poisoning people.

The next morning Liu Qingge prods Luo Binghe awake at a truly painful hour, and bullies him onto his sword. Knowing that it was futile to protest at this point, Lou Binghe just sighs, stepping up onto Cheng Luan and wrapping his arms around Liu Qingge's waist.

"When we get there," Liu Qingge calls back over his shoulder, "Take Zheng Yang and go out over the water like bait, and I can pick them off easily."

That didn't sound like a great idea to Luo Binghe, but he wasn't yet confident in his strategic planning to offer any counter suggestions. "All right," he says finally.

It takes them about two sichen of flying down the river before they spot any signs of the Kirin leeches. Luo Binghe spots something that he initially thinks might be floating logs. Until the 'log' opens its mouth exposing several rows of teeth!

"There's one," Binghe says, pointing.

"Good job," Liu Qingge says and takes them down closer to the tree line. The cultivators float in the leafy canopy watching the water. "There's at least five that I can see in the water," Liu Qingge says. "Check the banks, see if you spot any of them there."

The Kirin leeches blend well with their surroundings and Binghe wonders if they might have some latent ability to camouflage themselves. He starts paying closer attention to what seem

to be inert logs. It takes a few minutes but Luo Binghe catches one of the logs growing legs and shifting on the muddy bank.

Try as he may, he only spies the one. “I only see one on the banks, but I think they blend really well.” Luo Binghe adds, “I think we better count on there being more of them than that.”

“Do they have any weaknesses?” Liu Qingge asks, brows knitting.

Luo Binghe waves a hand. “I can’t remember anything specific. Just that Mu Shishu says they spit aphrodisiac poison.”

Huffing, Liu Qingge asks, “Why does everything have to spit poison? Brat, you better watch out. I’ll never hear the end of it from Shen Qingqiu if you get poisoned.”

Luo Binghe stands on his tiptoes on Cheng Luan and presses a kiss to Liu Qingge’s cheek. “You have permission to treat me,” he says cheerfully. “By the way, did you ever fill out your proxy form?”

Cheeks turning a delightful shade of pink, Liu Qingge sputters, “How do you know about those blasted forms!”

“Because while you and Shizun were in seclusion, I had lunch with Mu Shishu every month.” Lou Binghe tries to keep the accusation out of his voice, but he was angry at Shen Qingqiu for a long time about how he just left without a word, hurting Mu Shishu so *much*. “Well?” He prods. “Did you?”

Liu Qingge just presses his lips together and looks the other way.

“Shishu…” Binghe says this on a whine. “You have to at least tell me beforehand if I can treat you if you get poisoned. It’s very important to have consent *before* your life is at stake.”

Binghe watches the clench of Liu Qingge’s jaw. The war god turns his head to the side, and just nods sharply. His cheeks have darkened to a dull red.

Luo Binghe squeezes his arms tight around Liu Qingge. “Thank you,” he says. “We’ll be fine, but it’s good to have that established just in case.”

They get into position: Liu Qingge on the banks and Luo Binghe hovering in the air just over the surface of the water.

Out of the corner of his eyes Binghe sees motion that at first glance looks like a log floating down the river towards him. Probably a Kirin leech. He glances over at Liu Qingge meaning to give him a sign but freezes.

Liu Qingge tosses his hair and idly spins his sword. His grey eyes are filled with determination.

How is he so beautiful? Luo Binghe thinks and then something grabs his sword, knocking him into the river.

Shit! Luo Binghe treads water and anxiously swivels his head back and forth, looking for monsters. From the banks, Liu Qingge shouts, "Binghe!" And then *leaps* from the earth into the air, flashing Cheng Luan and directing the sword glare at the Kirin leech at Luo Binghe's back.

The sword glare slices it into two and Liu Qingge says harshly, "Get up here right now."

He sounds really pissed and Binghe cringes. He takes the hand Liu Qingge's extending and the war god yanks him up out of the water

Once he's got his feet on Cheng Luan, Liu Qingge demands, "Are you all right?" He is so clearly concerned and his face is *so close* that Luo Binghe wraps his arms around Liu Qingge's neck, pulling him down for a kiss.

Liu Qingge squeaks in surprise, but responds eagerly, pressing himself closer. Binghe licks across the seam of his lips until Liu Qingge opens for him. Then he strokes their tongue together, pulling a moan from somewhere deep in Liu Qingge's chest.

A splash of something strikes both of them and they break apart to see a circle of Kirin leeches surrounding them.

They've just been hit by the aphrodisiac poison, Luo Binghe realizes. "Oh no," he mutters.

"Get to the banks," Liu Qingge orders him, floating higher into the air. He wipes the side of his face where he got hit with the poison.

Binghe leaps off the sword, flips in the air and lands right on the river bank, feet sinking into the mud. A log lunges at him and hastily he calls Zheng Yang and attacks.

The Kirin leeches aren't actually that hard to kill, Luo Binghe realizes. They just count on their victims being stunned from the poison. Binghe feels a little warm but that's it! Oh good, maybe it's not that bad?

Once he's dispatched all the Kirin leeches coming after him on the banks, he glances over at Liu Qingge who's diving down into the water, killing some monsters and then shooting up into the sky before repeating the process.

In short order, the Kirin leeches are very, very dead and Liu Qingge lands lightly on the banks. He shakes the water out of his face then reaches back squeezing the water from his long ponytail. His arms are still over his head when he meets Luo Binghe's eyes, and the war god sucks in a deep startled breath.

"Binghe," he says, sounding quite strange. Liu Qingge gives him an intense look. "*Binghe*," he says again, this time taking a step forward. Except he staggers and goes down to one knee.

"Qingge!" Luo Binghe lunges forward, supporting the older man. "What's wrong?"

Blinking rapidly, Liu Qingge reaches out and brushes a thumb across Luo Binghes cheek. “It’s *you*,” he says thickly.

Oh shit, Binghe thinks. “Liu Qingge, you’ve been poisoned.”

“No,” Liu Qingge says, shoving Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe falls backward into the muck on the riverbanks, and Liu Qingge leans over him, one hand in the sandy bank and the other stroking across Binghe’s face.

“It was like this *before*,” Liu Qingge says plainly. He shakes his head a little. “Fuzzy.” He mutters. “Binghe should have been *mine* from the *start*.”

Luo Binges stomach flips over and he wonders how in the world he’s supposed to resist this kind of temptation? He gets his fingers around Liu Qingge’s wrist and does a quick scan. Already he feels the poison dampening the older man’s qi. If Binghe *doesn't* treat him, Liu Qingge might suffer permanent damage to his cultivation.

He releases Liu Qingge’s wrist and meets his eyes. “Qingge,” Luo Binghe says. “I want to be yours.” As he watches, Liu Qingge’s pupils expand leaving just a thin ring of grey iris visible. “But we need to go somewhere safe to work out the poison.”

Liu Qingge leans in, eyes half lidded. “Mine?” He asks hoarsely, and Binghe nods.

“That’s right. But Qingge has to let me up so I can get us somewhere *safe*. And then this Binghe will be yours.” The way that Liu Qingge keeps looking at Binghe, like he’s the most delicious thing he’s ever seen in his *life*, has Binghe swallowing hard. “Qingge, I’m standing up to rinse off quickly,” he gestures to his mud covered self, “And then I’ll take you somewhere safe.”

“Fine,” Liu Qingge says. “Hurry up.”

Binghe can’t help chuckling a little, in spite of the stress and arousal. Even like this, Liu Qingge is still very true to himself. Liu Qingge leans back allowing Luo Binghe to stand. He uses his qi to dry the damp mud sticking to his robes, and then shakes his robes out, dispelling a lot of the now-dried dirt and sand.

He uses some river water to clear the mud from his hands and dries them with a thought. While he’s preoccupied, strong arms snake around his waist and wander across Luo Binghe’s chest. Gods above, he thinks, he’s not going to survive this. Binghe captures one of Liu Qingge’s hands, and brings it to his mouth. He turns in place and then Liu Qingge thrusts his hands into Binghe’s wild hair.

Liu Qingge’s eyes darken, and he bites his lower lip. Luo Binghe can’t help following the movement of his white teeth and the way they pull at the soft flesh of his lip. He doesn’t seem to be as affected as Qingge, but Luo Binghe feels the *pull* of the poison regardless.

“Let’s go,” Luo Binghe says hoarsely, and for once he’s the one to pull the other man onto *his* sword.

The caves Liu Qingge had mentioned are in the foothills of the Kunlun mountains. Luo Binghe chooses a set high above the ground. He hovers before the opening, and reaches out with his qi, checking for any signs of life within the cave. Luckily, he finds none, but does another sweep just to be sure.

Behind him, Liu Qingge presses his mouth to Luo Binghe's neck, and his hands continue wandering. Binghe has been hard as a rock for nearly a sichen while they flew, and the situation is becoming too urgent to ignore. Honestly, it's a wonder Liu Qingge has lasted this long, but perhaps kissing and fondling Binghe the entire flight has helped.

He sets up warning arrays, marking off a safe perimeter. Once that's done, Luo Binghe starts pulling blankets and other necessary items from his qiankun pouches. He glances over at Liu Qingge, pacing restlessly.

The war god has already stripped off his outer robes and shed his boots.

Luo Binghe takes a deep breath. It's time.

Skin, so much beautiful skin. Luo Binghe peels Liu Qingge's inner robes away until he's bare, running his warm hands all over the war god's warm body. Liu Qingge's cheeks stay flushed, and his eyes hazy.

"Binghe….Binghe," Liu Qingge murmurs over and over as Binghe kisses his way down Liu Qingge's chest. Luo Binghe's mouth waters at the sight of the leaking cock waiting for him. He wants nothing more than to take the length of him into his mouth, and Binghe salivates just thinking about it.

Trying to keep control of himself, Luo Binghe chants meditation sutras silently. He leans down and suckles one of Liu Qingge's nipples into his mouth, running his tongue over the stiffened peak.

Liu Qingge cries out, arching his neck. He tosses his head from side to side while Binghe plays with his chest, flicking his blunt nails over one nipple while he sucks hard at the other. Hands plunge into his hair, and Liu Qingge *tugs*.

It makes Binghe want to go limp, makes him yearn for when Liu Qingge can be the one leaning over *him* while Luo Binghe writhes. Soon, he thinks. But he has to treat Qingge first. Binghe just wishes this was happening because they both wanted it, and not because they *need* to.

Still, there's no reason Luo Binghe can't say and do the things he wants to. He pulls off Liu Qingge's chest, and holds his head between his two large hands, until the war god meets his eyes. "Liu Qingge," Binghe says. "This disciple wants you *so much*! Say I can have you?"

Liu Qingge blinks quickly, but Binghe doesn't miss the glassiness over his eyes. A gentle hand on Binghe's face, and a thumb brushing over his lower lip. "Binghe…*yes*, it's *you*..."

Unable to resist, Luo Binghe leans in and kisses Liu Qingge. It feels like lightning shoots down his spine, it's so deliciously *good*. Liu Qingge moans into his mouth and Binghe can't resist nibbling at his lips until Liu Qingge parts them. Luo Binghe licks right into his mouth, urging Liu Qingge to respond in kind. Binghe nearly comes on the spot at the first hesitant stroke of Liu Qingge's silky tongue against his.

He loses a chunk of time like that, lost in the sensual heat of Liu Qingge's mouth. But then Liu Qingge starts moving restlessly under him, and Binghe remembers: he's poisoned.

Binghe calls his qiankun pouch to his hand and finds the little jar of medical lubricant Mu Shishu had pressed upon him a while back. Although at the time, he'd been embarrassed down to his toes, he's now grateful for Mu Shishu's insistence at teaching him everything he needed to know about dual cultivation.

He gentles his kisses, and squeezes Liu Qingge's waist. "Qingge, forgiveness, but I need to prepare you…it will likely feel…weird."

"It's fine, hurry up," Liu Qingge demands, pushing himself up onto his elbows and watching. His cheeks are flushed, and his eyes dark and dilated. He spreads his knees apart without any hesitation whatsoever.

"Some pressure," Luo Binghe warns. He waits until Liu Qingge takes a breath to slip the first finger in. Liu Qingge frowns, and then Binghe presses up into the soft walls.

"Ah-" Liu Qingge hastily jams the side of his hand into his mouth. His cock has long been flushed red at the tip, and as Binghe watches, the slit becomes shiny with pre-cum. Luo Binghe licks his lips, and swivels his finger in a semi circle.

Delicious noises fall unheeded from Liu Qingge's lips, and Binghe easily adds a second finger. He pauses a moment to add more lubricant to his fingers, and during that time, Liu Qingge recovers enough sense to start glaring at him.

"Hey!" Liu Qingge calls, like he thought Binghe forgot about him or something. Clearly he can still think well enough. That won't do!

"Shishu, don't worry," Luo Binghe says, smile widening. "This disciple will take care of you."

The older man opens his mouth to say something, but Binghe loses the battle with himself and takes Liu Qingge's cock into his mouth at the same time he slides his fingers back in. Two fingers deep and he swirls them against the walls of Liu Shishu's body.

Luo Binghe flickers his tongue over the tiny slit at the head of Liu Qingge's dick, and then sucks.

"*Fuck!*" Liu Qingge shouts, and spills right onto Luo Binghe's waiting tongue. Binghe swallows every single drop, and then just holds the softening member in his mouth while he finishes the preparation.

Liu Qingge goes completely limp and boneless after his orgasm. Luo Binghe gives the soft cock one last suckle, then releases it to rest on Liu Qingge's lean stomach. "Qingge, it's time," Luo Binghe tells him. He lines himself up, and presses in so very slowly. The incredible slick heat Liu Qingge's body feels like it's sucking his cock right inside. Binghe braces himself on his hands and peers down at where their bodies meet.

"Feels better already," Liu Qingge murmurs, and reaches a hand up to push Binghe's hair away from his face. His grey eyes look a bit more normal now. "Move," he says. "I'm not going to break."

It's so much better than anything Luo Binghe could have imagined. After a few awkward thrusts, his body catches, and his rhythm evens out. He starts moving in a smooth glide back and forth. Binghe shifts his weight, inadvertently pressing in a little harder than he intends to, and Liu Qingge cries out.

"Ah-Binghe! There, do that again!" Liu Qingge demands, clutching at his shoulders. He bites his lip so hard it makes the tender flesh turn white.

Ha, Binghe thinks, *he forgot about the prostate!* And after Mu Shishu did all that work telling him about it. Now that he recalls that particular lecture, Binghe unwraps Liu Qingge's legs from about his waist in favor of folding him nearly in half. "Qingge, can you hold your legs like this?"

"Of course, I *can*, what's-" His words dissolve into a sharp gasp and Binghe holds him by the waist thrusting *hard*. By Liu Qingge's reaction, Binghe's hitting the right place!

Now that Liu Qingge is more obvious about his pleasure, Binghe finds it strangely easy to keep going. Some part of him deep inside wants nothing more than to make Liu Qingge insensate with ecstasy. Maybe he'll want to keep Binghe that way. "Qingge, you're mine now," Luo Binghe tells him, feeling a little deranged as he says it. Who is *he*, a disciple, to say such a thing to a *Peak Lord*?

Except Liu Qingge opens his eyes and frowns deeply. "You should have been mine from the start." His face relaxes into an absolutely *blinding smile. "Now you are," he finishes smugly.*

Luo Binghe surges into him, taking his mouth in a deep kiss. Strong arms wrap around his shoulders and back, holding him so tightly, that Binghe couldn't escape even if he wanted to.

Good.

Long after the poison is expelled from Liu Qingge's body, Luo Binghe is still clinging to the older man like a limpet. Idly, Liu Qingge's hand moves through his hair.

"Stop worrying, brat." Liu Qingge tells him.

"...I can't." Luo Binghe says into his chest. "Shizun's going to be furious when he finds out."

Snorting, Liu Qingge says dryly, "Are you going to tell him?"

"No, but. He'll know. I'm certain of it." Luo Binghe says.

“We’ll see. It will be fine.”

Chapter End Notes

MQF: Sneezes

SQQ: Sneezes

LQG: Don't worry, how would he *possibly* know?

LBH: *winces* (he'll know)

I'm back from the beach!! We got lucky and the weather was absolutely AMAZING big blue skies every day!

Probably 1-2 more chapters of this and then it will be finished FOR REALSIES.

Come tell me what you think!!

LBH extra #6

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: This covers events in chapter 21, 22 and 23.
Canon typical violence, talk of sex pollen and consent.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once Liu Qingge's cultivation is stable enough, Luo Binghe insists on returning to the sect. "You need to be seen by Mu Shishu," he says firmly, ignoring Liu Qingge's protests.

Binghe- if someone had asked him- would have thought the aftermath would be awkward. Wiping away bodily secretions and getting dressed again, for one thing. For another, Liu Qingge has lost whatever ability he had to keep his hands away from Binghe. Luo Binghe doesn't mind this at all, of course, it just makes concentrating significantly more difficult.

All through the air, Liu Qingge stands behind him on Zheng Yang, hands wandering. Luo Binghe thinks at one point, *who does he think he is, me?*

But it's *good*.

Luo Binghe wants nothing more than to night hunt with Liu Qingge for the rest of their lives. Except, he's anxious. His demon side is sealed, according to Meng Mo, but the seal is not likely to last too much longer. What if Liu Qingge *hates* him after the seal is gone and his demonic heritage is revealed? How is Binghe supposed to live after that? He's pretty sure that he would be unable to even draw the next breath if Liu Qingge denounced him.

Thank all the gods that Shizun and Mu Shishu already know.

Grimly he flies to Cang Qiong without bothering to rest. Behind him, Liu Qingge fusses, complaining that he's well enough to fly on his own. Sorry, not happening, Luo Binghe thinks without remorse. Besides, this way Qingge is free to kiss the back of Binghe's neck occasionally.

Liu Qingge wants him to go straight to Qian Cao, but Luo Binghe just *imagines* the look on Shizun's face if he didn't go to Qing Jing peak *first*. So he flies directly to the designated arrival area.

The arrival area has been in use for a long time now. Apparently, Shen Qingqiu disdained having disciples flying hither and yon all over his peak and shortly after the Qing generation ascended to their current positions he assigned the area at the edge of the bamboo forest for people to arrive and depart.

He lands easily, storing his sword. There's no one around, Luo Binghe notices. It's deliberately out of the way for a reason, he thinks in amusement. So he doesn't protest when Liu Qingge leans in for a kiss.

At this point they've spent close to a month in close quarters, first with the thrice weekly training and then with the extended night hunt. Binghe has grown used to Liu Qingge being in his space. He's grown used to being able to run his hands over Liu Qingge's broad shoulders, and to bite at his lips.

Binghe presses closer when Liu Qingge wraps his arms around his waist, and hums into his mouth when their tongues meet. He wants to stay in this moment forever-

"*Get away from my disciple*." Shen Qingqiu's words are sharp as a whip crack, and Luo Binghe leaps away from Liu Qingge.

Shen Qingqiu's face is pale, eyes wide. He walks across the clearing to them, and his sword materializes into his hands as he does so. "Binghe. Go to the bamboo house and wait for me." He doesn't look at Luo Binghe at all, his attention is focused completely on Liu Qingge.

Oh, no, this is *so* bad. "Shizun-" Binghe tries.

"Shut. Up." Shen Qingqiu hisses. To Liu Qingge, he says, "I *trusted* you to take care of him! Not to-" His expression *twists*, "Take advantage of him, and confuse him."

Liu Qingge presses his lips together. For a moment, his gaze flicks to Luo Binghe, until Shen Qingqiu steps in between them.

"Don't you *dare* look at him," Shen Qingqiu snarls, voice getting progressively louder. "You better defend yourself, Liu Qingge." Xiu Ya's glare grows bright enough to block out the world, and Luo Binghe quickly loses track of what's happening.

Liu Qingge hasn't drawn his sword, makes no attempt to defend himself. First, Shen Qingqiu punches Liu Qingge in the face. Then he lifts Xiu Ya in a manner that suggests he's really going to kill the other man. Luo Binghe hastily flash steps in front of Liu Qingge a split second before Shen Qingqiu's sword would have sliced through Liu Qingge's chest.

Shen Qingqiu's eyes widen alarmingly, and at the last second he averts his strike, sending a ferocious sword glare across the peak taking out a large swath of his precious bamboo. The power of the strike knocks Binghe off his feet and right into a nearby tree trunk.

"Binghe!" Liu Qingge shouts. He tries to move to Luo Binghe, but Shen Qingqiu blocks his way. At last, Liu Qingge manifests Cheng Luan and prevents Shen Qingqiu from striking him down where he stands.

"I *said*, stay away from my disciple," Shen Qingqiu growls, and the fight begins in earnest.

Neither peak lord looks up as another cultivator speeds into the vicinity, jumping off their sword and running to Luo Binghe. Mu Shishu! Mu Shishu whips out a talisman that glows bright white and disintegrates.

Mu Shishu takes one look at Luo Binghe and mutters, “Oh, my god.” He kneels down and starts passing spiritual energy.

“Mu Shishu, I-I couldn’t help it,” Binghe says weakly, afraid that Shishu will be disappointed in him. Shizun and Liu Qingge have moved away from them, and Binghe thinks they’re in the bamboo forest if the bright lights and sounds of distant crashing are any indication.

Mu Shishu just sighs and stands up. “You’ll be fine, Binghe,” he says. The Qian Cao peak lord looks up when the air whistles, signaling the arrival of the sect leader. Yue Zhangmen’s travel is like a meteor, and the ground shakes at such speeds so close to the earth. The healer is quickly called away to help mediate.

Binghe slumps back against the tree trunk, miserable. Was it just a little while ago that he was *happy* and kissing Liu Qingge? He closes his eyes and tries to circulate his qi.

Several minutes later, Yue Qingyuan and Shen Qingqiu emerge from the bamboo. Zhangmen Shibo looks deeply amused but Shizun just looks really angry. Shen Qingqiu’s dark green eyes fix on Luo Binghe immediately, and he walks straight towards Binghe. Luo Binghe can’t help flinching.

“Get up, little beast,” Shen Qingqiu snaps, and Luo Binghe would like to! But you threw him at this tree really hard! His back hurts! And it’s a little hard to breathe. Narrowing his eyes, Shen Qingqiu crouches down, and wraps his long fingers over Binghe’s wrist for a scan.

Shen Qingqiu’s lips thin, and the deep frown lines intensify. He leans down, and unceremoniously lifts Luo Binghe to his feet. “Get on Xiu Ya,” Shen Qingqiu demands, and meekly, Binghe does so.

He’s not sure where to put his hands anymore. Being shameless with Liu Qingge has apparently really warped him, because Binghe comes dangerously close to wrapping his arms around Shizun’s waist. After an annoyed huff, Shizun somehow maneuvers himself *behind* Luo Binghe. His fingers feel like claws on Binghe’s shoulder.

Shizun takes them to the healing pavilion immediately, causing a bit of a ruckus in the hallway when he demands to see Mu Shishu. One of the senior healers leads them to an exam room and motions Binghe up onto the bed while Shizun paces like a caged tiger.

Thankfully, Mu Shishu arrives not too long after and talks Shen Qingqiu down from his murderous rage. After Shen Qingqiu leaves the room, Mu Shishu proceeds to give Binghe a thorough dressing down! Binghe feels a little bit bullied about it, actually! What was he supposed to do, let Liu Qingge *die*?

(He may or may not ignore his own culpability in the matter)

Healer Xie returns a little while later to evaluate him. Luo Binghe has been circulating his qi. He didn’t feel like he was that affected by the poison much at all, really. Xie Yanmei arches an eyebrow at Binghe’s hopeful look.

“You’re free to go,” she tells him, arms crossed over her chest.

“Ah. Xie Shijie, do you know if-” Luo Binghe starts.

Appearing *quite* amused, Xie Yanmei says, “He’s left already.” She reaches into her sleeves and pulls out a scroll. “You should look this over, and then sign it if you want to.” She meets Luo Binghe’s eyes squarely. “Think carefully, Luo Shidi.” She hands him the scroll.

A little mystified, Luo Binghe unrolls it. He scans the document quickly and finds his own name listed halfway down the page. At the bottom, Liu Qingge’s signature is boldly written in thick black ink. “The proxy form?” He says this to himself, but the healer answers anyway.

“Yes,” Xie Yanmei confirms. “And it’s confidential, so even Peak Lord Mu would not tell Shen Qingqiu about it. Shizun is very serious about patient privacy.”

Binghe feels like he’s been waiting his entire life for someone-for *Liu Qingge* to ask him this question. He’s ready with the answer. “Do you have a brush?”

The next day, Luo Binghe is summoned to the bamboo house where Shen Qingqiu is waiting for him. Shizun doesn’t look like an angry tiger today, but he definitely looks a lot more tense than he usually does after spending time with Mu Shishu. Binghe thinks Mu Shishu would say something like, *I took one for the team*, whatever that means.

“Do not let me catch you near that brute again,” Shen Qingqiu tells him, and Binghe nods dutifully.

“I won’t,” he says sincerely. Binghe definitely won’t be caught!

Shen Qingqiu huffs and crosses his arms over his chest giving him a skeptical expression. Luo Binghe makes his face appear perfectly innocent. *I Am A White Lotus!* it screams. *I Have Never Done Anything Wrong, Ever, In My Whole Life*, Binghe projects.

Except Shizun just rolls his eyes. “Cut that out, it doesn’t work on me.”

Well, it kind of does!

Shen Qingqiu dismisses him, but as soon as Luo Binghe turns to leave, Shizun calls after him, “Binghe.” When he glances back at Shizun, the older man looks stern. “You will tell me if anything goes…awry.” It is not a question and Luo Binghe does not ask for clarification.

Not wanting to admit to anything, Binghe just nods.

“Get out, little beast, and try to be good.” Shen Qingqiu waves him out the door.

It’s not difficult to ignore Shizun’s order to stay away from Liu Qingge. It doesn’t seem like Shizun really meant it, anyway.

The Immortal Alliance Conference

Shen Qingqiu, Shang Qinghua and Liu Qingge find Luo Binghe while he's battling a horde of Ghost head spiders.

Shizun's sharp voice demands he aim for the temples, and instinctively, Binghe adjusts his focus. Obeying Shen Qingqiu is second nature for the most part. The ghost head spiders die much more easily this way. Before, Binghe had been trying to break their skulls, which should have been easy. In fact, it was not.

Luo Binghe locks eyes with Liu Qingge. The war god looks like he wants to say so many things. Luo Binghe tries to say something, anything, but a swell of demonic energy sweeps over them like a wave. Shang Qinghua flinches and grabs his head, leaning over in pain.

Shen Qingqiu presses his lips together. "Brute, go on ahead and find out what did that." When Liu Qingge turns to leave, Shizun grabs his arm. "Whatever just came through the rift is *powerful*. Be *cautious* for once in your stupid life, Liu Shidi."

Liu Qingge shakes his arm off, annoyed. He says to Binghe, "Don't do anything stupid." He waits for Binghe to nod at him, then takes off on his sword.

"Little beast, come with me." Shen Qingqiu eyes him for a long moment. "Remember to protect *yourself*." He looks like he swallowed something foul when he adds, "Liu Qingge can handle himself. Don't worry about your brute."

Luo Binghe appreciates this concession from Shen Qingqiu. "Yes, Shizun," he says. "This disciple is ready."

They follow on foot in the direction Liu Qingge took, and the sounds of battle fill the air.

"Let's go," Shizun says, calling his sword and taking off. Binghe jumps into the air calling Zheng Yang to catch him, then flies after Shen Qingqiu at full speed.

He arrives just behind Shizun and they both just stop and stare for a moment at the spectacle which is the Bai Zhan War God battling an immense ice demon. The ice demon is huge, taller even than Yue Qingyuan and wider by half again. He's fighting with an enormous black sword formed out of ice. Liu Qingge holds his own, blocking strikes with enough force to rattle the trees and shake the ground.

The ice demon is *fast* though, and worse, he seems to be just…disappearing and reappearing out of thin air.

“Shidi, that must be the Mobei Jun of the Northern desert clans, they use portals!” Shen Qingqiu calls out this information and then leaps into the fray, fighting at Liu Qingge’s side, just like he’d done when Qiong Ding peak was under attack.

Shen Qingqiu ducks under a wide armed swipe and calls some leaves straight from his sleeves, sharpening them with qi and sending them out at Mobei Jun’s neck. They stop just in front of Mobei Jun’s skin, freezing and shattering into harmless dust.

The ice demon merely arches an eyebrow and manifests multiple spears of ice, sending them all towards Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Qingqiu flash-steps out of harm's way while Liu Qingge calls up his Thousand Sword Array, making them rain down upon the ice demon’s head.

Mobei Jun stands expressionless, seemingly carved from ice. Over his head, he forms a thick barrier of black ice that quickly deepens into gray, meters thick. Liu Qingge recalls his sword and jumps right at the barrier, bringing Cheng Luan down and shattering it with a solitary blow.

Hurt not at all, Mobei Jun snaps his head around like he’s looking for something. His gaze fixes on Luo Binghe. “What are *you*?” He says musingly.

Shen Qingqiu looks his way for a moment, before his eyes land on something just behind Luo Binghe. Out of nowhere, Shang Qinghua swoops down and scoops him up onto his sword. Binghe struggles at first, but Shang Shishu hisses quietly, “Luo Binghe, if you want to live: *Shut. Up.*” They hover high in the air, high enough that Mobei Jun is unlikely to see them.

Down below, Mobei Jun summons a frigid blast of air, clearing the Shen Qingqiu’s dust storm. “Annoying,” he says harshly, and then sends an ice spear right through Shen Qingqiu’s chest.

The force of the strike throws Shen Qingqiu backwards, and he hits the ground *hard*. He coughs up blood, and wraps his hand weakly around the spear in his chest. Luo Binghe’s chest goes cold when Shizun stops moving.

Liu Qingge redoubles his effort, and Luo Binghe hisses at Shang Shishu, “Let me *go*, I can *help*!”

“You’ll get killed,” Shang Qinghua says flatly. “You can’t win against him, Binghe, not yet.” His eyes are dark and shadowed and his expression feels very far away. He holds Binghe around the middle like a vise, and Luo Binghe finds to his astonishment that he can’t get free. Bitterly, Shang Shishu says, “Everyone always underestimates An Ding peak. We’re physical cultivators too, you know.”

Light bursts out of the woods, catching their attention, and both men look down to see Mu Qingfang arrive. The physician uses some kind of talisman to divert attention from himself, and runs immediately to Shen Qingqiu. Luo Binghe breathes a huge sigh of relief. Surely Mu Shishu will fix Shizun!

No sooner does Binghe finish that though when Liu Qingge cries out. Somehow the ice demon pinned him to the ground with a long spear of ice.

“No!” Binghe screams, the cry drawn from his throat without his intention. With a burst of strength he didn't know he had, he breaks Shang Qinghua’s hold, flinging himself at the ground, landing and rolling to his feet. Moebi Jun’s eyes snap to the man still on the sword up above, and he sends a pulse of pure demonic qi at Shang Shishu, throwing him off the sword. Shang Qinghua sails down in a great arc through the air until he slams his side into the ground, hitting his head *hard*.

Mobei Jun calls up another bunch of ice spears, aimed right at Liu Qingge, still impaled on the ground. Time slows down for Binghe, and he flash steps right in front of Liu Qingge, something inside of him *bursting* free. Pure power explodes out from Binghe, obliterating the ice spears transforming them into harmless snow that falls gently all around them.

Luo Binghe’s head feels like it’s actually going to explode. A great burning pain like a poisoned dagger strikes him right in the center of his forehead. He falls to his knees, clutching his head.

“Binghe!” Liu Qingge yells from right behind him.

Mobei Jun starts walking toward them, closing the distance quickly. Behind him, the fumes and stench of sulfur rise from the great black rift in the earth. Binghe feels him approaching somehow, but he’s in too much pain to do anything about it.

“Leave him alone,” Liu Qingge snarls, furious. He struggles to free himself.

From right in front of him, Mobei Jun says with no infection at all, “You are not human.”

Luo Binghe has never hated someone more. “Fuck you.” He straightens on his knees, swaying a little.

Mobei Jun reaches out, and Binghe loads his palm with qi and strikes, knocking the ice demon’s hand away. The world blurs around him as his consciousness fades in and out. The pain in his head is terrible.

“Idiot child,” Mobei Jun tells him. “This is not the place for you. I told you: You are not *human*.” He reaches out and presses two fingers into the middle of Binghe’s forehead.

Like his flesh is on fire, Binghe *screams* in pain, the noise wrenched from his chest as he suffers.

“Leave him *alone*!” Liu Qingge cries from somewhere above him and the sound of ice breaking reaches Luo Binghe.

Binghe blinks but his vision is a haze of red. Even breathing feels terrible, and his head is excruciating. When his sight clears, he sees Liu Qingge falling backward to the ground, one hand wrapped around the huge ice spear in his stomach.

From out of nowhere, Mu Qingfang appears, and sends his needles at Mobei Jun, who just waves a hand. The needles fall to the ground, useless.

Mobei Jun returns his attention to Luo Binghe. “You don’t belong here,” he says firmly.

“Don’t tell my disciple where he belongs,” Shen Qingqiu says coldly, walking calmly into this scene of destruction. He stands directly in front of Mu Shishu, blocking him from the ice demon’s sight.

“Shizun,” Binghe says desperately, “Liu Shishu-” If he dies-Binghe doesn’t know what would happen. But he’s prepared to burn down the world or die trying.

"Is too stubborn to diem idiot boy, *focus*," Shizun snaps at Binghe before returning his full attention to the demon in front of him. “You’ve done enough damage here,” Shen Qingqiu says. “Go back to the demon realm.”

Mobei Jun *smiles*, calling up a line of ice spears. They float in the air, pointed right at Shen Qingqiu, Mu Qingfang and Liu Qingge. “I don’t mind killing all of you,” the demon lord says, “But the boy, this *demon* is coming with me.”

“Over my. Dead. Body,” Shen Qingqiu swears. He spins, forming an array with his hands, forming flames out of nothing and shooting them at Mobei Jun. “Binghe, *run*.”

Luo Binghe pulls himself to his feet. He staggers with the first step and falls over. He ignores Shen Qingqiu and tries to crawl to Liu Qingge. If they’re all going to die, he’s going to die with his love.

“If you wish,” Mobei Jun says carelessly, demonic power spiking. He extends a hand. Ice forms in a sheet over the ground. It races forward enveloping Shen Qingqiu’s feet. Ice grows up, encasing Shen Qingqiu up to the neck.

Mu Qingfang says urgently, “Binghe. Run away, *now*.” He gets to his feet shakily.

Luo Binghe thinks this is what it feels like to have a broken heart. “Mu Shishu,” he says on a wobbling voice. “*I can’t*.” He can’t leave Liu Qingge.

He *won’t*.

Losing patience, Mobei Jun grabs Binghe by the neck.

“Let him go,” Mu Qingfang cries. “Binghe belongs with us, his *family*.” Something fills the air, fills it with tension, with *power*. Beside him, Mu Shishu straightens to his full height, seemingly refreshed. “Leave now,” he says coldly in a completely different tone of voice, “Before I kill you.”

Chuckling, Mobei Jun says, “Can you? Let’s find out.” He melts into shadow, and Binghe falls down to his knees again. Mu Shishu very calmly looks *exactly* at where the ice demon emerges from. Mu Shishu draws a sword of flame, and-wait, what?

Binghe blinks, and blinks again. Yes, Mu Shishu is definitely holding a sword made of flames, with a glowing golden hilt.

Mu Qingfang ducks ice spears, and sends a fiery sword glare at Mobei Jun. The flames crawl over the ice demon's skin, and the smell of burning flesh fills the air. Mu Shishu twirls his sword, then moves faster than sight, cutting off one of Mobei Jun's hands.

As the air overhead whistles, Mu Qingfang smiles icily. "Either *leave* or *die*, I don't care which."

Mobei Jun steps backwards into a portal and disappears.

Luo Binghe continues crawling to Liu Qingge, but keeps having to pause to nearly pass out. HIs vision fades at one point while Shen Qingqiu talks with Mu Shishu. Then he thinks maybe Zhangmen Shibo has arrived? Binghe finally gets to Liu Qingge when Mu Qingfang comes back their way.

Liu Qingge is unconscious, face pale. He's barely breathing. Mu Shishu gets down on one knee and lays a hand on Liu Qingge's chest, closing his eyes in concentration.

Binghe feels waves of power emanating from Mu Shishu. Except. He's spent a lot of time with Mu Shishu in the past. This power…doesn't feel like him at all. After a few minutes, the healer rises, and moves to Shen Qingqiu to heal him.

Laying a hand on Liu Qingge's cheek, Binghe murmurs, "Qingge. Qingge, *please*. Please don't…" He sobs, large tears sliding over his cheeks.

Then Mu Shishu is back in front of him "Hello, Luo Binghe," Shishu says kindly. His gray-green eyes sparkle. "It's good to meet you."

Blinking in confusion, Binghe asks, "Mu…Shishu?"

The healer holds out a hand and wiggles it from side to side in the air. "Sort of. Let me heal you," he requests and Binghe nods. Cool fingers press against his wrist and qi, cool and crisp flows through his meridians.

"Liu Shishu?" Binghe can't help asking with a choked voice.

"Will be fine," Mu Qingfang assures him. He stands up, and looks at Shen Qingqiu. "Goodbye," he says, then collapses.

Chapter End Notes

LBH: I"M IN LOVE, EVERYTHING IS PERFECT

LQG: *silently* I'm in love, everything is perfect

SQQ: I'm going to vomit, and beat the shit out of *someone*

I was trying really really hard to show that LBH is a dramatic teenager at heart! He has FEELINGS and it's everyone's problem LOL. Mean while LQG is just as happy, but it's all internal.

One more extra left!!!!! Come tell me what you think!

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Chapter warnings: a little angst, and a happy ending. :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Qingqiu catches Shen Yuan before he hits the ground. He looks up desperately at Yue Qingyuan. “Qi-ge, help us!”

Liu Qingge is still on the ground, unconscious. Shang Qinghua is still unconscious. Binghe at least can walk.

Mobei Jun may be be gone, but the danger isn’t.

Yue Qingyuan meets Shen Qingqiu’s eyes grimly. Qi-ge uses his qi to open a slash on one hand and then draws a talisman in the air with his blood. A slit in the air appears and Yue Qingyuan leans forward, speaking into it. “Cang Qiong Peak Lords, hear me. All Peak Lords come immediately to this location. This is an emergency.” The slit glows once, an angry red, and then seals up.

“Shen Shidi, report.”

Shen Qingqiu holds Shen Yuan protectively in his arms. “Mu Shidi called down a martial God to help us, a God also of healing.” He nods at his two unconscious Shidi. “If not for him, we all would have died.” He looks to his disciple. “Binghe, guard Liu and Shang Shishu. Tell me at once if you see any demons approaching.”

Binghe looks like he wants to make a smart remark, but Shen Qingqiu just glares at him, and the idiot boy subsides.

Frowning, Qi-ge looks at Luo Binghe. Specifically, the mark on his forehead. “Is that-”

“Forget about that,” Shen Qingqiu waves a hand. “When the others get here, they need to draw a distance shortening array so we can get home.” He looks down at Shen Yuan, brows softening for just a moment. “He needs expert treatment, and he can only get that from his senior disciples.”

Just then, the air nearby starts glowing and an array forms into a dark portal. From it step three peak lords: Qi Qingqi, Wei Qingwei and Xiao Qingshen. Each of them carries their sword. Qi Qingqi waits in the threshold effectively holding the array open.

Wei Qingwei is the first one to notice the downed figures of Shang Qinghua and Liu Qingge. Also, he's the first to notice that Luo Binghe sports a rather unusual tattoo on his forehead. "Ah, Shen Shixiong, was your disciple *always* a heavenly demon, or?"

"Never mind that," Yue Qingyuan tells them repressively. "Qingshen Shidi, can we open a distance shortening array back to the Peaks from here? Specifically to Qian Cao?"

"First, let's get to safety, and then we'll form the array," Shen Qingqiu objects. "Luo Binghe has also been severely injured and his qi is in a delicate state right now. I will take Mu Shidi," his tone leaves no room for arguments.

Wei Qingwei offers to carry Shang Qinghua and Yue Qingyuan takes Liu Qingge, with Binghe trailing anxiously at his side.

Back at the observation tower, where the portal took them, things are loud and chaotic. The Old Palace Master spies Yue Qingyuan and rushes over, demanding help with his disciples and the injured.

Shen Qingqiu has no patience for this idiot. The palace master brings weak disciples, and then acts shocked when many of them get killed. Shen Qingqiu still feels angry about the way they latched onto Luo Binghe, dragging him down, and preventing him from- Shen Qingqiu blinks, and accidentally squeezes Shen Yuan.

Binghe's name is at the top of the leader board? He *won*?!

Forget that, he chides himself. "Someone find Mu Shidi's people, and the rest of you get started on the array." His tone leaves no room for argument.

Yue Qingyuan's smile grows strained and he says to the Old Palace Master, "We have several injured Peak Lords, and we will return them to our home immediately."

The old Palace Master sputters in anger. "What do you mean? You can't just *leave!*"

"Why not?" Qi Qingqi says coolly. "Who do you imagine can stop us?"

Wei Qingwei, normally a cheerful sort of man, crosses his arms over his chest, muscles bulging through his robes. "Qingxin, Qingshen," he calls over his shoulder to the peak lords of Ling Yu and Ku Xing respectively, "We need to get to work on the array that Shen Shixiong asked for." He gives the old Palace Master a direct look. "You must excuse us."

"Help them, Qi-ge," Shen Qingqiu says, exhausted. He's nearly died himself today at least twice, and all he wants is to sleep. Well, he amends the thought, he wants Shen Yuan to be fully recovered, and THEN he can sleep. "They'll need you to power it while we transport so many of our people."

"Shen-di, it will be done," Yue Qingyuan says, and confers with the other peak lords.

Xie Yanmei shows up with the rest of the Qian Cao disciples. She lets out a cry of dismay when she spies her unconscious Shizun. "What happened?"

Honestly, Shen Qingqiu doesn't even know where to start. "An ice demon attacked us all. Mu Shidi single handedly healed most of us while fighting said demon and then a martial god used him as a vessel."

Xie Yanmei's mouth opens and closes a few times. Then she shakes her head. She hastily starts instructing the other healers and very soon, the injured Peak Lords are all on portable stretchers being closely monitored.

Were these disciples just….carrying portable stretchers in their qiankun pouches? Shen Qingqiu has questions.

All at once, power hums behind them and the array opens up, this time Yue Qingyuan standing in the middle of it, holding it open. "Peak Lords, we must return the injured home. Xie Shizhi, please accompany them."

"Of course, Zhangmen Shibo," she says.

Slowly, they get the injured peak lords through the array, and they arrive directly in front of the Healing Pavilion. Yue Qingyuan steps through onto Qian Cao peak, closing the portal behind him.

Xie Yanmei pulls out a special talisman, alerting the peak, and in moments healers swarm from the building, Wu Yanshin at the front.

Wu Yanshin takes one look at them and starts barking orders.

Shen Qingqiu finds it a relief for once, to have someone competent giving him direction. In short order, both Shen Yuan, and Liu Qingge are whisked off to one section of the building, while Shang Qinghua is taken to the wing of the pavilion which deals with head injuries.

He's left standing around aimlessly with Luo Binghe and Yue Qingyuan. Shen Qingqiu feels like he's in delayed shock or something. What is he supposed to do now?

"Shidi…" Yue Qingyuan says, and nods his head at Luo Binghe who is *also* staring aimlessly. "I think you both should come with me to Qiong Ding peak. It seems we have much to discuss."

A formal meeting with Qi-ge and Binghe sounds tiresome, and Shen Qingqiu's impatience is obvious. He doesn't see why he should leave Qian Cao just to have a heart to heart. "Why?" He demands. "I've known about his heritage for several years, and so has Mu Shidi." Shen Qingqiu crosses his arms over his chest. "He went out alone with Liu Qingge for nearly a month! And now they're-" He takes a deep cleansing breath. "*Cultivation partners*." Shen Qingqiu wonders if that will *ever* get any easier to say. Or think, actually. Next to him, Luo Binghe quails a little bit under Shen Qingqiu's withering tone.

"Not to mention," Shen Qingqiu concludes viciously, "He won the Conference!"

Yue Qingyuan looks a little startled at having received such an impassioned defense. "I see." He directs his attention to Luo Binghe. "Luo Shizhi, it seems as though you have made close

ties with more than one Peak Lord over the years. It also has not escaped me that Shang Shidi went out of his way to protect you from that ice demon, at the expense of his own well being." His dark eyes meet Luo Binghe's.

Straightening to his full height, Luo Binghe says, "Yes, Shibo. This disciple is grateful for the care and begs to be allowed to continue his studies."

Shen Qingqiu snorts at the entire *I Can Be Good* aura that Binghe throws at Qi-ge.

Sighing, Yue Qingyuan runs a palm over his face. "Very well. Luo Shizhi will continue as he has been. Shen Shidi, we will need to discuss the ramifications of keeping a demonic-"

"Forgiveness, Zhangmen Shibo, but this disciple is only half demon," Luo Binghe announces, like that matters in the least. Shen Qingqiu resists the urge to cuff him on the back of the head. Unfortunately, his fan got shredded back in Jue di Gorge so he flicks a spark of qi at Binghe's shoulder.

The boy yelps, and gives Shen Qingqiu a wounded look. "Shizun," he sounds betrayed.

"Enough of this," Shen Qingqiu says, "I'm going back to check on Mu Shidi." He walks away without another word.

"Shizun, wait!" Luo Binghe calls, but Shen Qingqiu doesn't turn around. He hears the boy trotting after him. "Shizun, do you think-"

Stopping in his tracks, Shen Qingqiu takes a good look at his disciple. In the past few hours, he's been outed as a demon and nearly killed several times. Not only that, but he's watched his Shizun, his lover, and his closest Shishu *also* nearly die. Shen Qingqiu *gets* it, but he's so damned *tired*. "Binghe, *please*." He closes his eyes for a moment before opening them and meeting Luo Binghe's gaze. "Actually, come with me."

He starts walking back to the Healing Pavilion again, trusting Binghe to follow. Once they're through the doors, it's like organized chaos. There's usually a disciple waiting in the entry way for triage purposes, but right now it appears that every disciple of the peak is occupied.

It's only been a short time, so Shen Qingqiu gestures to the waiting area. He picks a chair with his back to the wall, and after a moment, Binghe hesitantly joins him.

"What if-" Binghe starts, but Shen Qingqui cuts him right off.

"Don't," he warns sharply. "You will think only of their recovery," Shen Qingqiu commands. "We will wait here until we get word." He shifts on the cushion. "I suggest you get comfortable, it is likely to be some time." He closes his eyes and tries to meditate.

Hours pass.

“Shibo.”

Opening his eyes, Shen Qingqiu looks up at Wu Yanshin. She looks exhausted. “He’s stable, but remains unconscious. Whatever happened…” She frowns deeply. “His meridians…it’s like his cultivation system was burned from the inside out.”

Shen Qingqiu stands up, meeting her eyes. Luo Binghe listens attentively. “A martial God used him as a vessel.”

Wu Yanshin rubs a hand roughly over her face. “Shizun, why are you like this?” She mutters under her breath. “You can go in and see him if you want.” She then turns her attention to Luo Binghe. “Luo Binghe, Liu Qingge is also stable, and *also* unconscious.” Wryly, she adds, “You may sit with him if you want.”

Shen Yuan is pale, and still. Shen Qingqiu’s feet become stuck in the doorway and he feels like someone just hit him in the chest with a house. *A-Yuan,* he thinks, and wants to despair. He remembers looking into ocean eyes without the customary warm light he’s used to, and his throat tightens.

Someone has placed a chair next to the bed, and Shen Qingqiu moves to sit in it. He drinks in Shen Yuan’s face for long moments before carefully picking up his cool hand. Shen Qingqiu brings that hand to his cheek and holds it there, closing his eyes.

A-Yuan, please come back to me.

Shen Yuan doesn’t move except to breathe in and out.

Days pass like this. Eventually, Wu Yanshin throws Shen Qingqiu out of the Healing Pavilion, forcing him back to his own Peak, and banning him for *days*. He sneaks back in, but makes sure to leave at first light.

The night shift staff grows used to finding unauthorized cultivation partners at the bedside. One night the entire Healing Pavilion erupts into pandemonium when Luo Binghe discovers Liu Qingge has awoken.

Binghe’s not supposed to be there, is the thing. But once Liu Shidi wakes, Binghe will not be moved. He insists on staying at the brute’s bedside. Shen Qingqiu hears rumors that Liu Qingge can’t move his legs yet.

Apparently the ice demon damaged his spinal cord, and Mu Qingfang (or the God that wore his body for several minutes) healed him enough that he’s likely to make a full recovery with time.

Shen Qingqiu finds himself once again feeling envious of Luo Binghe. But this time, it’s because his lover is *awake*. He gives up trying to sleep at the bamboo house. How can he sleep knowing that Shen Yuan may not wake up? Hope can he sleep when his entire heart is a few peaks away?

Wu Yanshin attempts to throw him out the first night shift she covers. It's Shen Qingqiu's fault, he's grown used to the usual night staff and stopped covering his tracks so much. Oh, Healer Wu *says* she wants Shen Qingqiu to go get some rest, but he's not buying what she's selling.

He digs his heels in, and then calls Qi-ge for backup when things come to a head. Xie Yanmei, the *other* senior healer that Shen Qingqiu knows, actually requests that he be allowed to stay at Mu Shidi's bedside as long as he wants.

Xie Yanmei prods Wu Yanshin and says, "You know Shizun would want him to be here."

In the end, Wu Yanshin gives in reluctantly.

Days become weeks with no sign of further recovery. Shen Qingqiu feels like he can't keep going on like this, holding out hope where there may not be much. No one says it to his face, but the longer that Shen Yuan remains asleep the grimmer his chances of recovery become.

Liu Qingge starts learning to walk again, and one day he comes to see Shen Qingqiu in Shen Yuan's sick room. Luo Binghe is practically holding up Liu Shidi, but his erstwhile Shidi is actually moving his feet, even if he can't fully bear his own weight yet.

Binghe somehow produces a chair out of a qiankun pouch and settles on it with Liu Qingge on his lap. Liu Shidi, having lost all shame whatsoever, merely sits quietly. Binghe does not attempt to start a conversation or pummel him with questions, a fact for which Shen Qingqiu is grateful.

After an hour or two, Liu Qingge starts leaning more heavily on Binghe, and Shen Qingqiu's disciple scoops up his lover, and takes him back to his own sick room.

Shen Qingqiu moves his chair close to the bed and leans over, arms across Shen Yuan's thighs and Shen Qingqiu's head resting near his knee. "Shen Yuan," he whispers. "I miss you. Come back to me."

Weeks turn into one month and then two. Shen Qingqiu has stopped going back to Qing Jing peak all together. He lived on the streets for years, living in one room is fine. He forgets to practice inedia but doesn't feel hungry in the least.

Binghe shows up one day with water chestnut cakes and shoves them under Shen Qingqiu's nose. "Shizun," he says grimly, "You're eating these, or I'm going to knock you out and force them down your throat," he threatens.

Shen Qingqiu feels like he's waking from a hazy dream. Everything feels unreal and far away. "Binghe?"

Gentling his voice, Luo Binghe hands him a cake. "Shizun, Mu Shishu would want you to eat. He would worry about you. Remember how you made me promise to take care of him? Well, Mu Shishu extracted a similar promise in the event something happened to him. Now *eat* lest this disciples' efforts go to waste."

Shen Qingqiu begins marking the weeks by Luo Binghe's visits. Every week Binghe makes some kind of sweet treat and bullies him into eating it. Sometimes Liu Qingge joins them, and sometimes they're joined by Shang Qinghua of all people.

Shang Shidi had been severely injured and had been in the process of dying when Mu Qingfang revived him. In some ways, Shen Qingqiu found that Shang Shidi was much changed from early losing his life.

He didn't talk as much, and seemed much less anxious overall somehow.

During the times when Shen Qingqiu was forced from Shen Yuan's bedside, it was Shang Qinghua who remained. Shen Qingqiu tried to keep his absences brief. When he returned he often found Shang Shidi telling stories to Shen Yuan, stories about fantastical places and beasts that Shen Qingqiu has never heard of.

He weaves stories about the origins of the heavenly demons, of the northern clans. He told stories of the first generation of Cang Qiong peak lords. And for some reason, he kept talking about *cucumbers* of all things.

So odd.

While Shen Qingqiu waits, Liu Qingge's condition quickly improves, and Luo Binghe informs him that they're leaving for a couple of weeks to try and get Binghe's demonic powers under better control. As it is now, his mood very much affects the amount of demonic qi the kid pumps out without intending to.

Shen Qingqiu is torn. On the one hand, he'd like to be a part of this, it's fascinating! But he's also not in a position to be going *anywhere* right now. Fine, he tells them. Binghe promises to return in two weeks to check on Shen Qingqiu.

When did his little beast turn into an actual responsible adult?

In Binghe's absence, Ning Yingying takes over mother hen duties and comes to sit with Shen Qingqiu several times a week.

Soon enough, Binghe returns from his trip with an idea. He wants to use his power over dreams to enter Shen Yuan's dreams and try to wake him from the inside. The healers insist that he's simply sleeping, and that he can wake at any time.

Knowing his brat of a disciple, even if Shen Qingqiu says no, Binghe will just do it anyway. At his heart, Shen Qingqiu also knows that Binghe would never do anything to hurt his beloved Mu Shishu. So the morning after that discussion, Shen Qingqiu excuses himself from the room and leaves Binghe to it.

He leans down, and kisses Shen Yuan on the forehead before he steps out. *Come back to me*.

Mu Shishu's dream world is very bizarre, Luo Binghe thinks. Everything is too loud, too bright and nothing makes sense.

He finds Mu Shishu in a white room, lying in a strange bed with white blankets. He doesn't look anything like himself, though, but Binghe is *positive* that's Mu Shishu lying motionless in the bed.

It can't be anyone *else*, actually.

He's moving through Mu Shishu's dreams, so Binghe walks around the room and observes closely. The man in the bed is thin, sick appearing. His hair is scandalously short and he has something stuck in his nose.

Mu Shishu does not wake, so Binghe moves on, searching. Somewhere, perhaps deep inside his brain, Mu Shishu is there. Luo Binghe will find him!

He searches through all sorts of memories: Family. Kind parents, and a very doted on little sister. Brothers which are loving but distant.

Eventually, Binghe discovers the most hidden part of Mu Shishu's memories. A living space high up in the air with the strangest furniture that Binghe's ever seen. It's there he finds Mu Shishu tucked into the corner of a lounge drinking something from a thick cup.

Mu Shishu looks up and his entire face brightens. "Binghe! How are you doing? All healed up after the conference?"

Head tilting to the side, Binghe peers at this young man in confusion. It's the same young man that he saw dying in the white room when he first entered Mu Shishu's dreams. "...Mu Shishu?" He asks hesitantly.

"Yeah, of-" Mu Shishu looks down at himself and laughs. It sounds exactly the same as it always has. "Yes, I'm your Mu Shishu, but this is what I looked like *before* I became him."

!!!! WHAT! Mu Shishu….is barely grown! "You-you're close to my age!" Binghe feels joy bubbling up in his chest and he laughs out loud. "Shizun is going to be *surprised* when he finds out!" He looks around curiously. "Where are we?"

Easily, Mu Shishu says, "This is where I lived, *before*." He waves a hand at the room they're sitting in.

Luo Binghe's eyes catch on Mu Shishu's malformed hands. In horror, Binghe thinks that it looks so painful! Mu Shishu's knuckles are swollen and red, and his fingers…none of them point in the direction they're supposed to. "Mu Shishu, you hands?"

Startled, Mu Shishu holds them up in front of his face for a moment. Then he meets Binghe's eyes. "Yeah, I had an autoimmune disease that caused this. It doesn't hurt right now. Anyway, how are you doing?"

Blinking in confusion, Binghe says, "How am *I*? I-we've been so worried about you! You've been asleep for *months*!"

“Oh,” Mu Shishu breathes, eyes faraway. He frowns. “Oh! Mu Qing saved us!”

That must be the martial god who descended during the conference. Binghe swallows. “Shishu…Shizun…Shizun isn’t doing so well.”

Mu Shishu’s face goes blank for long, terrifying seconds. “A-Jiu,” he whispers. His eyes fly to Binghe’s. “Binghe, I need you to help me wake up.”

Relieved beyond all measure, Binghe presses two fingers to Mu Shishu’s forehead, and the dream dissolves.

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Mu Shishu opens his eyes, and alarms start going off. Binghe nearly falls off the edge of the bed where he’s been perched with one hand on Mu Shishu’s arm. Healers rush in, and Binghe slips out.

He finds Shen Qingqiu pacing anxiously in the waiting area. He looks up when Binghe approaches. “Anything?” Shizun’s voice is tight.

Luo Binghe smiles, wide and happy. “He’s awake.” And then for the first time in his *life*, Shizun leaps forward and wraps his arms around Luo Binghe tightly.

“*Good boy!*” Shizun says thickly, and Luo Binghe holds on just as tight, eyes watering. Shizun seems embarrassed when he lets Binghe go, and all at once, Luo Binghe feels a mischievous impulse.

“Shizun…” Luo Binghe starts, eyes dancing. “Did you know that Mu Shishu imagines himself to be only a little older than *me*?”

Shen Qingqiu blinks. “*WHAT?*”

Binghe nods so hard his ponytail bounces. “That’s right! In his dream, Mu Shishu was a young man, not much older than me.” He smiles smugly.

Shizun’s mouth opens and then closes. He leans in. “Tell no one else about this, Binghe.” Then he huffs and adds, “You will draw me a portrait immediately.”

Luo Binghe can’t help grinning like an idiot. “Yes, Shizun.”

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Mu Qingfang wakes slowly, eyes crusted and mouth dry. He vaguely remembers his discharge from the Healing Pavilion and Shen Qingqiu taking him to the bamboo house.

When he manages to pry his eyelids open, he finds Shen Qingqiu curled up facing him, just watching him. “Hi,” Mu Qingfang says with a croaky voice.

“A-Yuan,” Shen Qingqiu says. His dark green eyes are bright with mirth. He runs a finger lightly across Mu Qingfang’s lower lip. “A-Yuan has some explaining to do,” he says mildly.

Look, Mu Qingfang’s not awake enough for this. He could go back to sleep, you know! “What are you talking about A-Jiu?”

Shen Qingqiu snorts lightly through his nose. A smile curves his lips up to the side. “Perhaps I should start calling you Yuan-er, since I understand you’re actually in your early twenties?” His smile widens. “I feel like such an old man, have I taken advantage of you?”

Outraged, Mu Qingfang shoves Shen Qingqiu, moving him not a bit. “Hey!”

“Is that a denial, Yuan-er?” Shen Qingqiu asks smoothly. He cups the back of Mu Qingfang’s neck with a large hand, then leans forward, brushing their lips together. “Is my Yuan-er a young man, still?”

“Shut up,” Mu Qingfang mutters. He’s admitting to *nothing*! Also, he’s going to kill Binghe for spilling the beans.

“Binghe promised me to draw a portrait of Yuan-er from the dream realm.” Shen Qingqiu says teasingly, brushing some hair away from Mu Qingfang’s face.

“Oh, my god,” Mu Qingfang says under his breath. “You are both rotten.” He scooches closer, tucking his face into A-Jiu’s warm neck. It feels *amazing*, so he squirms closer.

“When you’ve recovered a bit more, will Yuan-er consider marrying this old man?” Shen Qingqiu’s voice turns serious.

Snickering, Mu Qingfang says, “Yuan-er would marry Jiu-ge today, except I don’t think I could bow without falling over.” He wraps a lock of Shen Qingqiu’s hair around his finger and starts playing with it. “But once I can, you’ll be mine.”

That earns him a thorough kiss. “Yuan-er, this Jiu-ge has been yours for years.” Shen Qingqiu snakes his arms around Mu Qingfang’s body and pulls him tightly against his own. “And I’m not letting you go.”

“Jiu-ge,” Mu Qingfang says. “I’m keeping you.”

-FIN-

Chapter End Notes

You GUYS. I can't believe it's over! From the very first chapter I've been so blown away by the reception this story has received. This is now my most popular story!! I can't thank everyone enough for the kudos, the comments, the support that you all have given me.

MQF: Ok, so what happens after we get married?

SQQ: ? Have you not been paying attention? We live happily every after.

End Notes

So if you follow me on Twitter (Ehann1214) you know that I said today I was intending to have SY as MQF really focusing on LBH. And then two other peak lords jammed in!

LQG: You're acting really weird. It's kind of creepy.

SQQ: You're acting kind of weird (and I kind of like it)

Im crowdsourcing ideas, LOL, what do you think happened with OG Qingfang and SQQ to make SQQ not trust him? I feel like it was definitely a misunderstanding and that MQF truly didn't know what he did to piss Shen Qingqiu off so much.

Anyway, come and tell me what you think!! I need feedback!!!!! :)

Works inspired by this one

No mustache by b_liss_ko

I’m not dreaming by b_liss_ko

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!